Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 19

Maggie

Chapter: 126

Part: 1

Marcel spoke quietly, but Maggie could hear the edge in his voice. ‘You get me to do the dirty work, then sneak in and grab the bonus? So, you could get ahead?’

Maggie stared at him. ‘What?’

‘Don’t screw with me, Maggie.’ Two more steps and Marcel- was- um like- there, directly in front of her. ‘Don’t lie to me.’

Maggie fought for breath. Tears were pushing at the back of her eyes. She knew they were being too loud. Too loud. Everything was all wrong. The gun in her hand felt awful, cold but also alive, like

some alien creature that might suddenly roar to life.

‘What are you doing here?’ She finally said. ‘You were supposed to get proof for us and get out.’

‘I heard something,’ Marcel fired back. ‘I thought it might be one of the other players…’

The lights came on. Jack Donahue was standing in the doorway, eyes wild, chest slick with sweat. Then he was shouting, and the barrel of the gun was swinging toward them and there was an explosion of glass, and Maggie realized Marcel had just hurled a chair straight through the window. Everything was a fracture, roar, blur.

‘Go, go, go!’ Marcel was shouting, pushing Maggie toward the window. Maggie threw herself shoulder-first into the night. She heard the second explosion and felt a spray of softwood- as she went through the window, felt pain slice through her arm, and an immediate dampness pooling in her armpit.

Marcel hauled her to her feet, and they were running, fleeing into the night, toward the fence, while Jack shouted after them and sent two more shots off into the dark. Through the fence-gasping, panting-to the road, mostly empty of cars. There was the dazzle, the wide sweep of headlights. Maggie recognized Joh Joh’s car. Nathaniel suddenly materialized in front of her,

backlit, like an evil angel.

‘Are you okay?’ Her voice was wild, urgent. ‘Are you okay?’ ‘We’re okay,’ Maggie answered for both.

‘Let’s go.’

Then they were in the car and moving quickly, bumping over the country roads. For several minutes they were quiet, listening to the distant sound of police sirens. Maggie gritted her teeth every time they hit a rut. She was bleeding.

A piece of glass had sliced the soft skin of her inner arm. She still had the gun. Somehow, it had ended up in her lap. She kept staring at it, bewildered, half in shock.

‘Jesus Christ,’ Joh Joh finally said when they had put several miles behind them, and the noise of the sirens was lost beneath the quiet shushing of the wind through the trees. ‘Holy sh*t. That was crazy.’

Suddenly, the tension broke. Marcel started whooping and Nathaniel began to cry, and Maggie rolled the windows down and laughed like a maniac. She was relieved, grateful, alive sitting in the warm backseat of Joh Joh’s car, which smelled like soda cans and old gum.

Joh- John told them about nearly pissing himself when Trigger-Happy Jack came barreling out of the house; he told them that Ray had cracked one of the dogs with a huge rock and sent it

whimpering off into the dark. But half the kids never even made it over the fence, and he thought Byron Welcker might have been mauled. It was hard to tell in the dark, with all the chaos. Marcel told them about getting so close to Donahue; he thought for sure he'd be shot in the skull. But Donahue was enraged and drunk.

He wasn't aiming well. 'Thank God,' Marcel said, laughing. Marcel had stolen three items from the kitchen-a butter knife, a saltshaker, and a shot glass shaped like a cowboy boot-to prove they'd all been in the house. He gave Nathaniel the shot glass and Maggie the butter knife and kept the saltshaker for himself.

He made Joh Joh pull over and placed the saltshaker on the dashboard,

so he could get a good picture of it.

‘What are you doing?’ Maggie, she asked. Her brain still felt like it was wrapped in a wet blanket. Marcel passed over the phone wordlessly. Maggie saw that Marcel had emailed the photo to judgmentfallingtooyou@gmail.com, subject line: PROOF. Maggie shivered. She didn’t like thinking of the mysterious judges- invisible, watching, judging them.

‘What about the gun?’ Marcel said.

‘The gun?’ Nathaniel repeated.

‘Maggie found it,’ Marcel said neutrally.

‘Marcel and I found it at the same time,’ she said automatically. She didn’t

know why. She could feel Marcel staring at her.

‘You should both get credit, then,’ Nathaniel said.

‘You take the picture, Maggie,’ Marcel said. His voice was slightly gentler. ‘You send it.’ Maggie arranged the shot glass and the gun on her lap, clumsily, with one arm. Her stomach tightened. She wondered if the gun was loaded. Probably. So, weird to have a weapon so close. So-o, weird to see it sitting there.

She’d been a year old when her dad shot himself with a gun just like this one. She had a paranoid fear that it might go off on its own, exploring the night into noise and pain. Once the picture was

sent, Joh Joh asked, ‘What are you going to do with the gun?’

‘Keep it, I guess.’ But she didn’t like the idea of having a gun in her house, waiting, smiling its metal smile.

And what if Lily found it?

‘You can’t keep it,’ he said.

‘You stole it.’

‘Well, what should I do with it?’

Maggie felt Fear welling inside her.

She had broken into Donahue’s house. She had stolen something worth a lot of money. People went to jail for sh*t like that.

Joh Joh sighed. ‘Give it to me, Maggie,’ he said. ‘I’ll get rid of it for you.’

She could have hugged him. She could have kissed him. Joh Joh shut the gun in the glove box. Now everyone was quiet. The dashboard clocks glowed green at 1:42.

The roads were all dark except for the adhesive cone that was made by the headlights. The land was dark too, on either side of the houses, trailers, whole streets swallowed up by blackness like they were traveling through an endless tunnel, a place with no boundaries. It started to rain.

Maggie leaned her head against the window. At some point, she must have fallen asleep. She dreamed of falling into

the dark, slick throat of an animal, and of trying to cut herself out of its belly with a butter knife, which turned into a gun in her hands and went off.

Part: 2

SATURDAY,

JULY 2

THE NEXT DAY, THE NOTICES WERE EVERYWHERE of us not being round: skip a day it was- were somewhere in Pa- between the wire fences that orange belt that is so deadly, by Clit. Where you'll find quite a suburban street some building down the way, that you would call nicer than home, where we are from, they appeared, half-sodden, sunk in the mud in Meth Row, where Jenny would

meet up with boys for her needs and a quickie.

She comes down here more and more- The betting slips blew to the Pines Mobile Park, accepted on the soles of muddy boots, snatched up by the metal underbelly of passing trucks before absconding on the wind, printed on large, glossy sheets of paper, inscribed with the crest of the Pitt-County Police Department, I see jenny doing and running for it with a bag…

Our school had an annulment over the intercom the day before- ANY INDIVIDUALS FOUND TO BE IN WILL BE SUBJECT TO CRIMINAL PROSECUTION as an adult.

Part: 3

MONDAY, JULY 4

Marcel,

THE WEATHER STAYED BEAUTIFUL-FINE AND SUNNY, just hot enough for a whole week after the challenge at Ray's house.

The Fourth of July was no different, and Marcel woke to sunlight washing over his navy-blue blanket, like a slow surf of white. He was happy. He was more than happy. He was psyched. He was hanging out with Nathaniel today. His mom was home, awake, and making breakfast. He leaned in the doorframe and watched her crack eggs into a pan, break the yolks up with the edge of a wooden spatula.

‘What’s the occasion?’ He said. He was still tired and his neck and back were sore; he’d worked two shifts stocking shelves after closing time at the Home Depot in Leeds, where his mom’s ex-boyfriend Danny was a manager. Dumb work, but it paid okay. He had a hundred dollars in his pocket and would be able to buy Nathaniel something at the mall. Her birthday was still a few weeks away- July 29-but still. Might as well get her something small a little early.

‘I could ask you the same thing.’ She let the eggs sizzle away and came over to him and gave him a big smack on the cheek before he could pull away.

‘Why are you up so early?’

He could see traces of makeup.

So…?

She’d been on a date last night. No wonder she was in a good mood.

‘Didn’t feel like sleeping anymore,’ he said cautiously. He wondered whether his mom would admit to going out. Sometimes she did if a date had gone well.

‘Just in time for eggs. Do you want eggs? Are you hungry? I’m making some eggs for Dayna.’ She shook the scrambled eggs onto a plate. They were perfectly scrambled, trembling with butter. Before he could answer, she lowered her voice and said, ‘You know all that therapy Dayna’s been doing?

Well, Bill says-’

‘Bill?’ Marcel cut in. His mom blushed. Busted. ‘He’s just a friend, Marcel.’

Marcel doubted it, but he said nothing.

His mom went on, in a rush: ‘He took me out to Lea’s in Judson last night. Nice tablecloths and everything. He drinks wine, Marcel. Do you believe that?’ She shook her head, amazed.

‘And he knows someone, some doctor at Columbia Memorial who works with people like Day. Bill says Dayna’s got to go more regularly, like every day.’

‘We can’t-,’ Marcel started to say, but his mom understood and finished for him.

‘I told him we couldn’t afford it. But he said he could get us in, even with no insurance. Can you believe it? At the hospital.’

Marcel said nothing. They’d gotten their hopes up the before-new doctor, new treatment, someone who could help. And something always went wrong. A pipe burst and the emergency fund would dry up replacing it, or the doctor would be a quack. The one time they’d managed to see someone in a real hospital, he’d looked at Dayna for five minutes, done nerve tests, banged on her knee and squeezed her toes, and straightened up.

‘Impossible,’ he’d said, sounding angry, like he was mad at them for

wasting his time. ‘Car accident, right?

My advice is: to apply for a better chair. No reason she should be wheeling around in this piece of junk.’ And he’d toed the wheelchair, the five-hundred-dollar wheelchair Marcel had busted his ass for whole autumn trying to purchase, while his mom cried, while Dayna lay curled up every night on her bed, fetal, vacant.

‘So, you want eggs or not?’ His mom said.

Marcel shook his head. ‘Not hungry.’ He picked up Dayna’s plate, grabbed a fork, and carried both into the living room. She had her head sticking out of the open window, and as he entered, he heard her shout, ‘In your

dreams!' and then a burst of laughter from below.

'What's that about?' He asked her.

She snapped around to face him.

Her face went red. 'Just Ricky, talking stupid,' she said and took the plate from him. Ricky worked in the kitchen at Dot's, and he was always sending gifts up to Dayna-cheap flowers, purchased at the gas station, little teddy bear figurines. Ricky was all right.

'Why are you staring at me?' Dayna demanded.

'Not starring,' Marcel said. He sat next to her and pulled her feet into his lap, began working her calves with his

knuckles, as he always did. So, she could walk again. So, she would keep believing it. Dayna ate quickly, eyes on her plate. She was avoiding him. Finally, her mouth crooked into a smile. ‘Ricky said he wants to marry me.’

‘Maybe you should,’ Marcel said.

Dayna shook her head. ‘Freak.’

She reached out and punched Marcel’s shoulder, and he pretended it had hurt.

He was overwhelmed, momentarily, with happiness.

It was going to be a good day.

He showered and dressed carefully -he’d even remembered to put

his jeans in the wash, so they looked good, crisp, and clean and took the bus to Nathaniel's neighborhood.

It was only ten thirty, but the sun was already high, hovering in the sky like a single eye. As soon as Marcel turned onto Nathaniel's street, he felt like he was stepping onto a TV set like he was in one of those shows from the 1950s where someone was always washing a car in the driveway and the women wore aprons and said hello to the mailmen. Except there was no movement here, no voices, no people hauling trash or banging doors. It was too quiet. That was one thing about living in the back of Dot's: someone was always yelling about something. It was kind of comforting, in a way, like a

reminder that you weren't all alone in having problems.

Nathaniel was waiting on her front stoop.

Marcel’s stomach bottomed out as soon as he saw her. Her hair was fixed low, in a side ponytail, and she was wearing a ruffled yellow jumper-type thing, with the shirt and shorts attached, that would have looked stupid on anyone else. But on her, it looked amazing like she was a life-size, exotic Popsicle.

He couldn’t help but think that whenever she had to use the bathroom, she’d have to get undressed. She stood up, waving at him, as though he could miss her, wobbling slightly on large wedge heels.

She wasn't wearing her ankle brace anymore, even though he knew she'd screwed her ankle up again running away from Donahue's house. But she winced slightly when she walked.

'Joh- John, and Maggie went to get iced coffees,' she said as he approached her, doing his best not to walk too quickly. 'I told them to get us some too. Do you drink coffee?'

'I'd shoot coffee if I could,' he said, and she laughed. The sound made him warm all over, even though he still felt a weird, prickling discomfort standing on her property like he was in a One-of-These-Things-Doesn't-Belong drawing. A curtain twitched in a ground-floor window, and a face appeared and

disappeared too rapidly for Marcel to make out.

‘Someone’s spying on us,’ he said. ‘Probably my dad.’ Nathaniel waved dismissively. ‘Don’t worry. He’s harmless.’

Marcel wondered what it would be like to have a dad like that in the house, so taken-for-granted you could dismiss him with a wave of the hand. Dayna’s dad, Tom, had been married to Marcel’s mom-only for eighteen months, and only because Marcel’s mom got pregnant, but still. Her dad sent emails to her regularly, and money every month, and sometimes even came for a visit. Marcel had never heard a word from his father, not a single peep. All he knew was his dad worked construction and came

from the Dominican Republic. He wondered, for just a split second, what his father was doing now. He was alive and well, back in Florida.

He’d finally settled down and had a whole host of little kids running around, with dark eyes like Marcel’s, with the same high cheekbones.

Or even better, he’d taken a big-ass tumble from a tall scaffold and split open his head.

When Joh Joh and Maggie returned in another one of Joh- John’s Junkers- which rattled and shook so badly, Marcel was sure it would quit on them before they reached the mall- Marcel helped Nathaniel to the back and opened the door for her.

‘You’re so sweet, Marcel,’ she said, and kissed his cheek, looking almost regretful.

The ride to Kingston was good. Marcel tried to pay Joh Joh back for the iced coffee, but Joh- John waved him off. Maggie managed to coax a decent station out of the patchy radio, and they listened to Johnny Cash until Nathaniel begged for something that had been recorded in this century. Nathaniel made Marcel do magic tricks again, and this time she laughed when he made a straw materialize from her hair.

The car smelled like old tobacco and mint, like an old man’s underwear drawer, and the sun came through the windows, and the whole state of New York

seemed lit up by a special, interior glow. Marcel felt, for the first time since moving to Carp, for the first time in his life, as he belonged somewhere. He wondered how different the past few years would have been if he had been hanging out with Joh-John, and Maggie if he'd been dating Nathaniel, picking her up to drive her to the movies on Fridays, dancing with her in the gym at homecoming.

He fought down a wave of sadness.

None of it would last. It couldn't.

Marcel had driven past the Hudson Valley Mall in Kingston but had never gone inside it. The ceiling was fitted with big skylights, which made the spotless linoleum floors seem to glow. The

air smelled like body spray and the little bags of potpourri his mom put in her underwear drawer.

But mostly, it smelled like bleach. Everything was white, like a hospital, like the whole building had been dunked in Clorox. It was still early, and the crowds were thin. Marcel's cowboy boots echoed loudly on the ground when he walked, and he hoped Nathaniel wouldn't find it annoying.

Once inside, Nathaniel consulted a small flyer she had pulled from her bag and announced that she would meet up with the group in an hour or so, outside the Taco Bell in the food court.

'You're leaving?' Marcel blurted out.

Nathaniel looked at Maggie for help.

Maggie jumped in: ‘Nathaniel has an audition.’

‘An audition for what?’ Marcel asked. He wished he didn’t sound so upset. Immediately, Nathaniel began to blush.

‘You’re going to make fun of me,’ she said. His heart practically ripped open. Like he, Marcel Mason, would ever dream of making fun of Natalie Dalcas.

‘I won’t,’ he said quietly. Joh- John and Maggie were already wandering off. Joh- John pretended to shove Maggie into the fountain. She yelped and walloped him with a fist. Wordlessly, Nathaniel

passed him the flyer. It was badly designed. The font was illegible.

WANTED: MODELS AND ACTRESSES TO SHOWCASE THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST AT DAZZLING GEMS!

COMMERCIAL AUDITIONS: 11:30 A.M. SATURDAY AT THE HUDSON VALLEY MALL.

MUST BE EIGHTEEN OR OLDER.

‘Your birthday is on the twenty-ninth, right?’ Marcel said, hoping he might get extra points for remembering.

‘So? That’s only three weeks away,’ Nathaniel said, and he remembered she was one of the youngest

in their graduating class. He passed her the flyer, and she shoved it back into her bag as though she was embarrassed to have shown him. ‘I thought I’d try, anyway.’

You’re beautiful, Natalie, he wanted to say to her. But all he could say was, ‘They’d be morons to take anyone else.’

She smiled so widely, he could see all her perfect teeth, nestled in her perfect mouth, like small white candies. He was hoping she might kiss his cheek again, but she didn’t. ‘It won’t take more than an hour or two,’ she said. ‘Probably less.’ Then she was gone.

Marcel was left in a foul mood. He wandered behind Joh- John, and

Maggie for a while, but even though both were perfectly nice, it was clear they wanted to be alone. They had their language, their jokes. They were constantly touching each other too- pushing and shoving, pinching, and hugging, like kids flirting on a playground. Jesus. Marcel didn't know why they just didn't get it on already.

They were crazy about each other.

He made an excuse about wanting to get something for his sister- Joh- John looked vaguely surprised he even had a sister-and wandered outside, smoking three cigarettes in a row in the parking lot, which was beginning to fill up. He checked his phone a few times,

hoping Nathaniel had already texted. She hadn't. He began to feel like an idiot. He had all this money on him. He'd been planning to buy her something. But this wasn't a date.

Was it?

What did she want from him? He couldn't tell. Inside, he wandered around aimlessly. The mall wasn't that big-only on the floor-and there was no carousel, which disappointed him. One time he'd taken a carousel ride with Dayna at a mall in Columbus-or was it- Chicago?

They'd raced around, trying to ride every single horse before the music stopped playing, yelling like cowboys. The memory made him happy and sad at the same time. It took him a moment to

realize he'd accidentally stepped in front of a Victoria's Secret.

A mom and her daughter were giving him weird looks. He looked like a perv. He turned away quickly, resolving to go to Dazzling Gems and see whether Nathaniel was done yet. It had been an hour, anyway.

Dazzling Gems was on the other side of the building. He was surprised to see a long line snaking out of the boutique girls waiting to audition, all of them tanned and wearing next to nothing and perching like antelope on towering heels, and none of them close to as pretty as Nathaniel. They were all cheesy looking, he thought. Then he saw her.

She was standing just outside the

boutique doors, talking to an old person with a face that reminded Marcel of a ferret. His hair was greasy and thinning on top; Marcel could see patchy bits of his scalp. He was wearing a cheap suit, and even this, somehow, managed to look greasy and threadbare. At that second, Nathaniel turned and spotted Marcel. She smiled big, waving, and pushed toward him. Ferret melted into the crowd.

‘How was it?’ Marcel asked.

‘Stupid,’ she said. ‘I didn’t even make it through the doors. I waited in line for, like, an hour and barely moved three places. And then some woman came around and checked IDs.’ She said it cheerfully, though.

‘So, who was that?’ Marcel asked

carefully. He didn't want her to think he was jealous of Ferret, even though he sort of was…

'Who?' Nathaniel blinked.

'That guy you were just talking to,' he said. Marcel noticed Nathaniel was holding something… a business card.

'Oh, that.' Nathaniel rolled her eyes. 'Some modeling scouts. He said he liked my look.' She said it casually like it was no big deal, but he could tell she was thrilled.

'So-o he just, like, goes around handing out cards?' Marcel said.

He could tell right away he'd offended her. 'He doesn't just hand them out to anyone,' she said stiffly. 'He handed

one to me. Because he liked my face. Gisele got discovered in a mall.'

Marcel didn't think Ferret looked anything like a modeling agent-and why would an agent be scouting at the mall in Kingston, New York, anyway? -But he didn't know how to say so without offending her further. He didn't want her to think he thought she wasn't pretty enough to be a model because he did. Except for tall models and she was short. But otherwise.

'Be careful,' he said because he could think of nothing else to say.

To his relief, she laughed. 'I know what I'm doing,' she said.

'Come on. Let's go get something

to eat. I'm starving.' Nathaniel didn't like to hold hands because it made her feel 'imbalanced,' but she walked so close to him, their arms were almost touching. It occurred to him that anyone looking would assume they were together, like boyfriend-girlfriend, and he had a sudden rush of insane happiness. He had no idea how this had happened that he was walking next to Nathaniel Dalcas as he belonged there like she was his girl. He thought, vaguely, it had something to do with Terror. They found Joh- John, and Maggie arguing about whether to go to Sbarro or East Wok. While they hashed it out,

Marcel and Nathaniel agreed easily on Subway. He bought her lunch-a

chicken sub, which she changed at the last second to a salad (‘Just in case,’ she said cryptically)-and a Diet Coke. They found an empty table and sat down while Maggie and Joh- John stood in line at Taco Bell, which they had at last agreed on.

‘So, what’s up with them?’ Marcel said.

‘With Joh- John and Maggie?’ Nathaniel shrugged. ‘Best friends, I guess.’ She slurped her soda loudly. He liked the way she ate unselfconsciously, unlike some girls. ‘I think Joh- John has a crush on her, though.’

‘Seems like it,’ Marcel said.

Nathaniel tilted her head, watching him.

‘What about you?’ ‘What about me what?’

‘Do you have a crush on anyone?’ He had just taken a big bite of his sandwich; the question was so unexpected he nearly choked. He couldn’t think of a single thing to say that wasn’t lame.

‘I’m not -’ He coughed and took a sip of his Coke. Jesus. His face was burning.

‘I mean, I don’t-’ ‘Marcel.’ She cut him off. Her voice was suddenly stern. ‘I’d like you to kiss me now.’ He had just been scarfing a meatball sub. But he kissed her anyway. What else could he do?

He felt the noise in his head, the

noise around them, swelling into a clamor; he loved the way she kissed like she was still hungry like she wanted to eat him. Heat roared through his whole body, and for one second, he experienced a crazy shock of anxiety: he must be dreaming. He put one hand on the back of her head, and she pulled away just long enough to say, ‘Both hands, please.’

After that, the noise in his head quieted. He felt relaxed, and he kissed her again, more slowly this time. On the way home, he barely said anything. He was happier than he’d ever been, and he feared to say or do anything that would ruin it.

Joh- John dropped Marcel off first. Marcel had promised to watch fireworks

on TV with Dayna tonight. He wondered whether he should kiss Nathaniel again-he was stressing about it-but she solved the problem by hugging him, which would have been disappointing except she was pressed up next to him in the car and he could feel her boobs against his chest.

'Thanks a lot, man,' he said to Joh- John. Joh- John gave him a fist bump.

Like they were friends.

They were. He watched the car drive off, even after he could no longer make out Nathaniel's silhouette in the backseat until the car disappeared beyond a hill and he could hear only the distant, guttural growl of the engine. Still, he stood there on the sidewalk, reluctant to head inside, back to Dayna and his

mom and the narrow space of his room, piled with clothes and empty cigarette packs, smelling vaguely like garbage.

He just wanted to be happy for a little longer.

His phone buzzed. An email. His heart picked up. He recognized the sender.

Luke Hanrahan.

The message was short.

Leave us alone. I'll go to the police.

Marcel read the message several times, enjoying it, reading desperation between the lines. He'd been wondering whether Luke had received his message;

he had. Marcel scrolled down and reread the email he had sent a week earlier.

The bets are in.

The game is on.

Part: 4

I'll make you a trade:

A sister's legs for a brother's life.

Standing in the fading sun, Marcel allowed himself to smile.

Maggie,

IT HAD BEEN A GOOD DAY-ONE OF THE BEST OF THE whole summer so far. For once, Maggie wouldn't let herself think about the future, and what would happen in the fall, when Joh- John went to

college at SUNY Binghamton and Nathaniel headed to Los Angeles to be an actress. Maggie thought she could just stay on at Anne's house, as a kind of helper. She could even move in. Lily could come too; they could share a room in one of the sheds.

Of course, that meant she'd still be stuck in Carp, but at least she'd be out of Fresh Pines Mobile Park. She liked Anne, and she especially liked the animals. She'd been out to Mansfield Road three times a week, and she was already looking forward to heading back. She liked the smell of wet straw and old leather and grass that hung over everything; she liked the way the dog Muppet recognized her, and the excited

chattering of the chickens. She decided she liked the white Bengal's, too-from a distance, anyway.

She was mesmerized by the way they moved, muscles rippling like the surface of the water, and by their eyes, which looked so wise-so bleak, too, as though they had stared into the center of the universe and found it disappointing, a feeling Maggie completely understood. But she was happy to let Anne do the feeding. She couldn't believe the balls on the woman. It was a good thing Anne was too old for Fear. She would have nailed it.

Anne went inside the pen, got within three feet of the white Bengal's as they circled her, eyeing the bucket of meat hungrily-although Maggie was sure

they’d be just as happy to take a chomp of Anne’s head.

Anne insisted they wouldn’t harm her, though. ‘As long as I’m doing the feeding,’ she said, ‘they won’t use me for feeding.’ Maybe just maybe things would be okay. The only bad part of the day was the fact that Joh- John was constantly checking his phone, Maggie assumed for texts from Avery. This reminded her that Matt hadn’t texted her once since their breakup. Meanwhile, Joh- John had Avery (Maggie wouldn’t think of her as a girlfriend,) and Nathaniel had Marcel hanging on her every word and was also still seeing a bartender over in Kingston, some sleazy guy who rode a Vespa, which Nathaniel insisted was just as cool as a

motorcycle.

Right…?

But after they dropped off Marcel, Nathaniel asked, ‘Is Avery coming tonight, Joh- John?’ and when Joh- John said no, too quickly, Maggie felt at peace with the world. Nathaniel made them detour so she could get a six-pack; then they headed to 7- Eleven and bought junky Fourth of July food: Doritos and dip, powdered doughnuts, and even a bag of pork cracklings, because it was funny and Joh- John had bravely volunteered to eat some.

They headed to the gully: a steep, barren slope of gravel and broken-up concrete that bottomed out in the old train tracks, now red with rust and

littered with trash. The sun was just starting to set. They picked their way carefully down the slope and across the tracks, and Joh- John scouted the best place to light off the sparklers.

This was a tradition. Two years ago, Joh- John had even surprised Maggie by buying two fifty-pound bags of mixed sand from Home Depot and making a beach. He'd even bought loopy straws and those paper umbrellas to put in their drinks, so she would feel they were somewhere tropical.

Today, Maggie wouldn't have chosen to be anywhere else in the entire world. Not even the Caribbean. Nathaniel was already on her second beer, and she was getting wobbly. Maggie had a beer

too, and even though she didn't usually like to drink, she felt warm and happy. She stumbled over a loose slat in the tracks and Joh- John caught her, looped an arm around her waist. She was surprised that he felt so solid, so strong. So warm, too.

'You okay there, Heath-bar?' When he smiled, both of his dimples appeared, and Maggie had the craziest thought: she wanted to kiss them. She banished the idea quickly. That was why she didn't drink.'

I'm fine.' She tried to pull away. He moved his arm to her shoulders. She could smell beer on his breath. She wondered if he, too, was a little drunk.

'Come on, get off me.' She said it

jokingly, but she didn't feel like joking. Nathaniel was wandering up ahead of them, kicking at stones. Darkness was falling, and her heart was beating hard in her chest and for a moment, she felt like she and Joh- John was alone. He was staring at her with an expression she couldn't identify. She felt heat spreading through her stomach-she was nervous for no reason.

'Take a picture. It'll last longer,' she said and gave him a push. The moment passed. Joh- John laughed and charged; she Marcel him.

'Children, children. Stop fighting!' Nathaniel called back to them. They found a place to set off the sparklers. Nathaniel's fizzled and

sputtered out before they could get properly lit. Maggie tried next. When she stepped forward with the lighter, there was a series of cracking sounds, and Maggie jumped back, thinking confusedly she'd messed up. But then she realized that she hadn't even gotten the sparkler lit.

'Look, look!' Nathaniel was bouncing up and down excitedly. Maggie turned just as a series of fireworks-green, red, a shower of golden sparks exploded in the east, just above the treeline. Nathaniel was laughing like a maniac.

'What the hell?' Maggie felt dizzy with happiness and confusion. It wasn't even all-the-way dark yet, and there were never any fireworks in Carp. The nearest

fireworks wherein Poughkeepsie, fifty minutes away, at Wary as Park- where Lily would be with their mom and Bo right now.

Only Joh- John didn't seem excited. His arms were a-crossed, and he was shaking his head as they kept going: more gold, and now blue and red again, blooming and fading, sucked back into the sky, leaving tentacle-traces of smoke. And just as Nathaniel started running, half limping but still laughing, calling,

'Come on, come on!' like they could race straight through to the source, it hit Maggie too: this wasn't a celebration.

It was a sign. In the distance, sirens began to wail. The show-stopped

abruptly: ghostly fingers of smoke crept silently across the sky. At last, Nathaniel stopped running. Whipping around to face Maggie and Joh- John, she said, ‘What?

What is it?’ Maggie shivered, even though it wasn’t cold. The air smelled like smoke, and the wail of the fire trucks cut through her head, sharp and hot.

‘It’s the next challenge,’ she said.

‘It’s Fright.’

It was just after eleven p.m. by the time Joh- John dropped Maggie off in front of the trailer. Now she wished she hadn’t had the beer-she felt exhausted. Joh- John had been quiet since Natalie got out of the car.

Now he turned to her and said, abruptly, ‘I still think you should quit; you know.’

Maggie pretended not to know what he was talking about. ‘Quit what?’

‘Don’t play dumb.’ Joh- John rubbed his forehead. The light shining into the car from the porch lit up his profile: the straight slope of his nose, the set of his jaw. Maggie realized that he wasn’t a boy anymore. Somehow, when she wasn’t looking, he had become a guy - tall and strong, with a stubborn chin and a girlfriend and opinions she didn’t share. She felt an ache in her stomach, a sense of loss, and a sense of wanting.

‘The game’s just going to get more dangerous, Maggie. I don’t want

you to get hurt. I'd never forgiven myself if -' He trailed off, shaking his head. Maggie thought of that awful text message she'd received. Quit now, before you get hurt. Anger sparked in her chest. Why was the hell everyone trying to make sure she didn't compete?

'I thought you were rooting for me.'

'I am.' Joh- John turned to face her. They were very close together in the dark. 'Just not like that.' For a second, they continued staring at each other. His eyes were dark moons. His lips were a few inches away from hers. Maggie realized that she was still thinking about kissing him.

'Good night, Joh- John,' she said

and got out of the car.

Inside, the TV was on. Krista and Bo were lying on the couch, watching an old black-and-white movie. Bo was shirtless, and Krista was smoking. The coffee table was packed with empty beer bottles-Maggie counted ten of them.

‘Hey, Maggie Lynn.’ Krista stubbed out her cigarette. She missed the ashtray on her first try. She was glassy-eyed.

Maggie could barely look at her. She better not have been messed up and driving with Lily in the car; Maggie would kill her. ‘Where you been?’ ‘Nowhere,’ Maggie said. She knew her mom didn’t care. ‘Where’s Lily?’

‘Sleeping.’ Krista stuck a hand down her shirt, scratching. She kept her eyes on the TV. ‘Big day. We saw fireworks.’

‘Piss-packed with people,’ Bo put in. ‘There was a line for the goddamn porta-potties.’

‘I’m going to sleep,’ Maggie said.

She didn’t bother trying to be nice.

Krista was too drunk to lecture her.

‘Keep the TV down, okay?’

She had trouble getting the door to the bedroom open; she realized that Lily had balled up one of her sweatshirts

and shoved it in the crack between the door and the warped floorboards, to help keep out the noise and the smoke. Maggie had taught her that trick. It was hot in the room, even though the window was open, and a small portable fan was whirring rhythmically on the dresser.

She didn't turn on the light. There was a little moonlight coming through the window, and she could have navigated the room by touch, anyway. She undressed, piling her clothes on the floor, and climbed into bed, pushing her blankets to the footboard, using only the sheet as a cover. She had assumed Lily was sleeping, but suddenly she heard rustling from the other twin bed.

'Maggie?' She whispered. 'Uh-

huh?’

‘Can you tell me a story?’

‘What kind of story?’

‘A happy kind.’ It had been a long time since Lily had asked for a story. Now Maggie told a version of one of her favorites, ‘The Twelve Dancing Princesses,’ except instead of princesses, she made the girls normal sisters, who lived in a falling-down castle with a queen and king too vain and stupid to look after them. But then they found a trapdoor that led down to a secret world, where they were princesses, and where everyone fawned over them.

By the time she was done, Lily was breathing slowly, deeply. Maggie

rolled over and closed her eyes.

Part: 5

‘Maggie?’

Lily’s voice was thick with sleep. Maggie opened her eyes again, surprised.

‘You should be sleeping, Billy.’

‘Are you going to die?’

The question was so unexpected, Maggie didn’t answer for a few seconds. ‘Of course not, Lily,’ she said sharply.

Lily’s face was half-mashed into her pillow. ‘Kyla Anderson says you’re going to die. Because of Terror.’

Maggie felt a current of fear go through her fear, and something else,

something deeper and more painful.

‘How did you hear about Terror?’ She asked. Lily mumbled something. Maggie prompted her again.

‘Who told you about Fear, Lily?’ she asked.

But Lily was asleep.

The Graybill house was haunted.

Everyone in Carp knew it and had been saying it for half a century, since the last of the Graybill's had hanged himself from its rafters, just like his father and grandfather before him.

The Graybill curse. No one had lived in the house officially for more than forty years, although infrequently some

squatters and runaways risked it.

No one would live there. At night, lights flickered on and off in the windows.

Vocal sounds whispered in the mouse-infested walls, and ghosts of children ran down dust-covered hallways. Sometimes, locals claimed they heard a woman earsplitting screaming in the attic.

Those were the rumors, at least. And now, the fireworks: some of the old-timers, the ones who claimed they could still recollect the day the last Graybill was found swinging by the neck, swore that the fireworks weren't set off by kids at all.

They might not even be fireworks. Who knew what sort of forces leached out of that tumbledown house, what kind of

bad juju, sizzling the night into fire and flame?

The police officers thought it was just the usual Fourth of July prank. But Maggie, Nathaniel, and Marcel knew better. So did Kim Hollister and Ray Hanrahan and all the other players. Two days after the Fourth of July, their suspicions were confirmed.

Maggie had just gotten out of the shower when she booted on the ancient laptop and checked her email. Her throat went dry; her mouth turned itchy.
Judmentfallingtooyou@gmail.com

Subject: Enjoy fireworks? The show will be even better this Friday at ten p.m.

See how long you can stand it.

Remember no calling for help.

FRIDAY, JULY 8

Maggie,

‘IT’S TOO EASY,’ MAGGIE SAID AGAIN. SHE SQUEEZED the steering wheel. She didn’t like to drive.

But Joh- John had been insistent. He wasn’t going to make it to the challenge today, wasn’t going to sit around and wait for hours while the players tried to outlast one another in a haunted house.

And for once, she’d been able to use the car. Her mom and Bo were getting smashed with some friends in Lot 62, an

abandoned trailer mostly used for partying. They'd crawl home around four, or not until sunrise.

'They'll probably try and screw with us,' Nathaniel said. 'They've probably rigged the whole house with sound effects and lights.'

'It's still too easy.' Maggie shook her head. 'This is Fright, not Halloween.' Her palms were sweating.

'Reminisces about the time we were kids, and Joh- John dared you to stand on the porch for three minutes?'

'Only because you flaked,' Nathaniel said.

'You flaked too,' Maggie reminded her, sorry now that she had

brought it up. ‘You didn’t make it for thirty seconds.’ ‘Joh- John did, though,’ Nathaniel said, turning her face to the window. ‘He went inside, remember? He stayed inside for five whole minutes.’

‘I forgot about that,’ Maggie said.

‘When was that?’ Marcel spoke up unexpectedly.

‘Years ago. We must have been ten, eleven. Right, Maggie?’

‘Younger, Nine,’ Maggie wished that Joh- John had come.

This was their first challenge without him, and her chest ached. Being with Joh- John made her feel safe.

They turned the bend and the

house became visible: the sharp peak of its roof silhouetted against the clouds knotted on the horizon, like something out of a horror movie. It rose crookedly out of the ground, and Maggie imagined even from a distance she could hear the wind howling through the holes in the roof, the mice nibbling at the rotten wood floors.

The only thing missing was a flock of bats. There were a dozen cars parked on the road. Most people felt the same way Joh- John did, and most of the spectators had stayed home. Not all of them, though.

Maggie spotted Vivian Trevin, sitting on the hood of her car, smoking a cigarette. A group of juniors huddled not

far off, passing around a shared bottle of wine, looking solemn, as if they were attending a wake. For a second, before Maggie turned the engine off, the rain misting through the headlights reminded her of thin slivers of glass.

Marcel climbed out of the car and opened the door for Nathaniel. Maggie reached for the bag she'd packed for the night: food, water, a big blanket. She would be here for as long as it took to win. Nathaniel and Marcel, too.

Suddenly there was a muffled shout from outside. Maggie looked up in time to see a dark shape rocket past the car. Nathaniel screamed. And people were suddenly rushing into the road. Maggie threw herself out of the car and ran

around to the passenger side, in time to see Ray Hanrahan catch Marcel in the stomach with a shoulder. Marcel stumbled backward, bumping against the remains of a fence. A shower of wood collapsed behind him.

‘I know what you’re doing, you little freak,’ he spat out. ‘You think you can-’

He was cut off and grunted sharply.

Marcel had stepped forward and grabbed Ray by the throat. There was a collective gasp. Nathaniel cried out. Marcel leaned in and spoke quietly into Ray’s ear.

Maggie couldn’t hear what he

said. Just as quickly, he stepped backward, releasing Ray, who stood, coughing, and gagging in the rain.

Marcel’s face was calm. Nathaniel moved as though to hug him and then, at the last second, obviously thought better of it.

‘Stay the hell away from me, Mason,’ Ray said when he had regained his breath. ‘I’m warning you. You better watch it.’ ‘Come on, guys,’ Sarah Wilson, another contestant, spoke up. ‘It’s pouring. Can we get started?’ Ray was still glowering at Marcel.

But he said nothing.

‘All right.’ That was -Digging.

Maggie hadn’t seen him in the

crowd.

I love the old Chevy looking at the photos 3 on the tree, yet with newer parts… I find that cool.

His voice was suctioned away by the darkness and the rain. ‘Rules are simple. The longer you make it in the house, the higher your score.’ Maggie shivered. The night of the jump, when - Digging was crowing into the megaphone, seemed like it had happened years ago: the radio, the beer, the celebration.

She suddenly couldn’t remember how she had ended up here in front of the Graybill house, all its angles and planes wrong. A deformed place. Listing to one side as though it was in danger of collapse.

‘No calling for help,’ -Digging said, and his voice cracked a little. Maggie wondered whether he knew something they didn’t. ‘That’s it. Challenge is on.’

Everyone broke apart. Beams of light flashlights and the occasional blue glow of a cell phone-swept across the road illuminated the crooked fence, the tall grass, the remains of a front path, now choked with weeds. Marcel was pulling his backpack out of the trunk. Nathaniel was standing next to him. Maggie pushed her way over to them.

‘What was that about?’ Maggie asked. Marcel slammed the trunk closed.

‘No idea,’ he said. In the dark, it was hard to decipher his expression.

Maggie wondered whether he knew more than he was telling.

‘The guy’s a psychopath.’ Maggie shivered again as moisture seeped under the collar of her jacket, dampening her sweatshirt.

She knew, like everyone did, that Marcel’s older sister had gone up against Ray’s older brother two years ago in Joust and been paralyzed. Maggie hadn’t been watching -she’d been babysitting Lily that night with Joh- John.

But Nat had said the car folded up like an accordion. Maggie wondered if Marcel blamed the Hanrahan's. ‘Let’s stay away from Ray inside, okay?’ She said.

‘Let’s stay away from all of them.’

She didn’t put it past Ray Hanrahan to sabotage them- jump out at them, grab them, or take a swing. Marcel turned to her and smiled. His teeth were very white, even in the dark.

‘Deal.’ They trudged across the road and into the yard with the others. Maggie’s chest was heavy with something that wasn’t fear, exactly-more like dread. It was too easy.

The rain made the mud suck at her shoes. It would be a sh*t night. She wished she’d thought to try and sneak a beer. She didn’t even like the taste, but that would take the edge off, make the night go quicker.

She wondered whether the judges were here may be sitting in the

front seat of one of the darkened cars, legs on the dash; or even standing in the road, jogging up and down, pretending to be normal spectators.

That was the part of Fear she hated most of all: the fact that they were always being watched. They were on the front porch too quickly. Even Seller had just disappeared inside, and the door swung shut with a bang.

Nathaniel jumped…

‘You okay?’

Marcel asked her, in a deep voice.

‘Fine,’ Nat spoke too loudly. Once again, Maggie wished Joh- John had come along. She wished he were next to her, making stupid jokes, teasing her about

being afraid.

‘Here goes nothing.’ Nathaniel took a step forward and heaved open the door, which was hanging at a weird angle. She hesitated… ‘It smells,’ she said. ‘As long as it doesn’t shoot or bark, I’m fine with it,’ Marcel said.

He didn’t seem afraid at all. He moved forward, in front of Nat, and stepped into the house. Nathaniel followed. Maggie was the last to enter.

Immediately, Maggie smelled it too: mouse sh*t and mildew, rot, like the smell of a mouth closed for years. Jagged beams of light zigzagged across the halls and through dark rooms, as the other players slowly spread out, trying to stake out their corners, their hiding spots.

Floorboards creaked, and doors moaned open and closed; voices whispered in the dark. The blackness was as thick and heavy as soup. Maggie felt her stomach pooling, open with fear.

She fumbled in her pocket for her phone. Nathaniel had the same idea. Nathaniel's face was suddenly visible, lit up from underneath, her eyes deep hollows, her skin blue-tinged. Maggie used the feeble light from her phone to cast a small circle on the faded wallpaper, the termite-eaten molding.

Suddenly a bright light flashed on.

'Flashlight app,' Marcel said, as Maggie brought a hand to her eyes.

‘Sorry. I didn’t know it would be so strong.’

He directed the beam upward, to the ceiling, where the remains of a chandelier were swinging, creaking, in a faint wind. That was where three Graybill men had hanged themselves if the rumors were true.

‘Come on,’ Maggie said, trying to keep her voice steady. The judges might be anywhere. ‘Let’s move away from the door.’ They advanced farther into the house. Marcel took the lead. Footsteps rang out above them, on the second floor.

Marcel’s flashlight cut a small, sharp blade through the blackness, and Maggie was reminded of a documentary about the wreck of the Titanic she’d

watched once with Lily-the way the recovery submarines had looked, floating through all that dark space, crawling over the ruined wood and the old china plates, which were covered with mossy growth and underwater things. That was how she felt.

As if they were at the bottom of the ocean. The pressure on her chest was squeezing, squeezing. She could hear Nathaniel breathing hard. From upstairs came muffled sounds of shouting: a fight.

‘Kitchen,’ Marcel announced. He swept the beam of light across the rust pitted stove, a tile floor half ripped up.

All the images were disjointed, bleached white, like in a bad horror film. Maggie pictured insects everywhere,

spider webs, horrible things dropping on her from above. Marcel aimed his beam in the corner and Maggie almost screamed: for a second, she saw a face-black, pitted eyes, mouth leering.

‘Can you stop pointing that thing at me?’

The girl raised her hand in front of her eyes, squinting, and Maggie’s heartbeat slowed. It was just Sarah Wilson, huddled in the corner. As Marcel angled the light down, Maggie saw that Sarah had brought a pillow and a sleeping bag. It would be easier, far easier, if all the players could huddle together in one room, passing Cheetos and a bottle of cheap vodka someone had stolen from a parent’s liquor cabinet.

But they were beyond that. They passed out of the kitchen and down a short set of stairs, littered with trash, all of it lit up in starts and jerks: cigarette butts, brittle leaves, blackened Styrofoam coffee cups. Squatters. Maggie heard footsteps: in the walls, overhead, behind her. She couldn't tell.

'Maggie'-Nathaniel turned around, grabbed Maggie's sweatshirt.

'Sh-h-h-h,' Marcel hushed them sharply. He shut off the flashlight. They stood in darkness so heavy, Maggie could taste it every time she inhaled: things moldering, rotting slowly; slippery, sliding, slithery things. Behind her. The footsteps stopped, hesitated. Floorboards creaked.

Someone was following them.

‘Move,’ Maggie whispered. She knew she was losing it that it was probably just another player exploring the house-but she couldn’t stop a terrible fantasy that seized her: it was one of the judges, pacing slowly through the dark, ready to grab her.

And not a human, either-a supernatural being with a thousand eyes and long, slick fingers, a jaw that would come unhinged, a mouth big enough to swallow you. The footsteps advanced. One more step, and then another.

‘Move,’ she said again. Her voice sounded strangled, desperate in the dark.

‘In here,’ Marcel said. It was so

dark, she couldn’t even see him, though he must have been standing only a few feet away. He grunted; she heard the groaning of old wood, the whine of rusted hinges. She felt Nathaniel move away from her and she followed blindly, quickly, nearly tripping over an irregularity in the floor, which marked the beginning of a new room.

Marcel swung the door closed behind her, leaning into it until it popped into place. Maggie stood, panting.

The footsteps kept coming. They paused outside the door. Her breath was shallow, as though she’d been underwater. Then the footsteps withdrew.

Marcel turned on the flashlight app again. In its glow, his face looked like

a weird modern painting: all angles.

'What was that?' Maggie whispered. She was almost afraid neither Marcel nor Nat had heard.

But Marcel said, 'Nothing. Someone trying to freak us out. That's all.'

He placed his phone on the floor, so the beam of light was directed straight up. Marcel had a sleeping bag stuffed in his backpack; Maggie shook out the blanket she'd brought. Nathaniel sat down next to the cone of light, drawing the blanket around her shoulders.

Suddenly, relief broke in Maggie's chest. They were safe, together, around their makeshift version of a campfire. It

would be easy.

Marcel squatted next to Nathaniel. ‘Might as well get comfortable, I guess.’ Maggie paced the small room. It must have once been a storage area, or a pantry, except that it was a little way from the kitchen.

It was no more than twenty feet square. High up against one wall was the room’s single window, but the cloud cover was so thick, barely any light penetrated.

On one wall were warped wooden shelves, which now contained nothing but a layer of dust and yet more trash: empty chip bags, a crushed soda can, an old wrench. She used the light of her cell phone to perform a quick exploration.

‘Spiders,’ she commented, as her phone lit up a web, perfectly symmetrical, glistening and silver, which extended between two shelves. Marcel rocketed to his feet as though he’d been bitten on the ass.

‘Where?’

Maggie and Nathaniel exchanged a look.

Nathaniel cracked a small smile.

‘You’re afraid of spiders?’

Maggie blurted out. She couldn’t help it. Marcel had shown no fear, ever. She would never have expected it.

‘Keep your voice down,’ he said roughly.

‘Don’t worry,’ Maggie said. She turned off her phone. ‘It was just the web, anyway.’ She didn’t mention the small blurred lumps within it: insects, spun into the threads, waiting to be consumed and digested.

Marcel nodded and looked embarrassed. He turned away, shoving his hands in the pockets of his jacket.

‘Now what?’ Nathaniel said.

‘We wait,’ Marcel replied, without turning around. Nathaniel reached over and popped open a bag of chips. A second later, she was crunching loudly. Maggie looked at her.

‘What?’ Nathaniel said with her mouth full. ‘We’re going to be here all

night. Except it came out, ‘we're going to be crazy and sh*t all night.’

She was right… Maggie went and sat down next to her. The floor was uneven.

‘So, wave do you think it’s right too?’ Nathaniel said, which this time Maggie had no trouble translating.

‘What do I think about what?’ She hugged her knees to her chest. She wished the cone of light were bigger, more powerful. Everything outside its limited beam was rough shadow, shape, and darkness. Even Marcel, standing with his face turned away from the light.

In the dark, he could have been anyone.

‘I don’t know. Everything. The judges. Who plans all this?’

Maggie reached out and took two chips. She fed them into her mouth, one from each hand. It was an unstated rule that no one spoke about the identity of the judges. ‘I want to know how it got started,’ she said.

‘And why we’ve all been crazy enough to play.’ It was meant to be a joke, but her voice came out shrill. Marcel shifted and came to squat next to Natalie again.

‘What about you, Marcel?’ Maggie said. ‘Why did you agree to play?’ Marcel looked up. His face was a mask of hollows, and Maggie was suddenly reminded of one summer when she’d

gone camping with some other Girl Scouts, the way the counselors had gathered them around the fire to tell ghost stories.

They had used flashlights to turn their faces gruesome, and all the campers were afraid. For a second, she thought he smiled.

‘Revenge.’

Nathaniel started to laugh. ‘Revenge?’ She repeated.

Maggie realized she hadn’t misheard. ‘Nat,’ she said sharply. Nathaniel must have remembered, then, about

Marcel’s sister: her smile faded quickly.

Marcel's eyes clicked to Maggie's. She quickly looked away.

So-o, he did blame Luke Hanrahan for what had happened. She felt suddenly cold. The word revenge was so awful: straight and sharp, like a knife. As if he could tell what she was thinking, Marcel smiled. 'I just want to cream Ray, that's all,' he said lightly, and reached out to grab the bag of chips.

Maggie felt instantly better. They tried to play cards for a while, but it was too dark, even for a slow-moving game; they had to keep passing the flashlight around. Nathaniel wanted to learn how to do a magic trick, but Marcel resisted it.

Occasionally- they heard voices from the hall or footsteps, and Maggie

would tense up, certain that this was the beginning of the real challenge-spooky ghost holograms or people in masks who would jump out at them. But nothing happened. No one came barging in the door to say boo.

After a while, Maggie got tired. She balled up the duffel bag she'd brought under her head. She listened to the low rhythm of Marcel and Nathaniel's conversation; they were talking about whether a shark or a bear would win in a fight, and Marcel was arguing that they had to specify a medium.

…???…

Then they were talking about dogs, and Maggie saw two large eyes (a white Bengal's eyes?) the size of

headlights, staring at her from the darkness. She wanted to scream; there was a monster here, in the dark, about to pounce. And she opened her mouth, but instead of a scream coming out, the darkness poured in, and she slept.

Part: 6

Marcel,

Marcel WAS DREAMING OF THE TIME THAT HE AND Dayna had- ridden the carousel together in Chicago. Or Columbus. But in his dream, there were palm trees, and a man selling grilled meats from a brightly colored cart. Dayna was in front of him, and her hair was so long it kept whipping him in the face.

A crowd was gathered: people

shouting, leering, calling things he couldn't understand. He knew he was supposed to be happy he was supposed to be having fun, but he wasn't. It was too hot.

Plus, there was Dayna's hair, getting tangled in his mouth, making it hard to swallow. Making it hard to breathe. There was the stench from the meat cart, too. The smell of burning. The thick clouds of smoke.

Smoke…

Marcel woke up suddenly, jerking upright. He'd fallen asleep straight on the floor, with his face pressed against the cold wood. He had no idea what time it was. He could just make out

Maggie's and Nathaniel's entangled forms, the pattern of their breathing. For a second, still half-asleep, he thought they looked like baby dragons. Then he realized why: the room was filled with smoke. It was seeping underneath the crack below the door, snaking its way into the room.

He stood up, then thought better of it, remembering that smoke rises, and dropped to his knees. There was shouting: screams and footsteps sounded from other parts of the house.

Too easy. He remembered what Maggie had said earlier.

Of course...?

Firecrackers exploded here on

the Fourth of July; there would be a prize for the players who stayed in the house the longest.

Fire… The house was on fire. He reached over and shook the girls not bothering to distinguish between them, to locate their elbows from their shoulders. ‘Wake up. Wake up.’

Natalie sat up, rubbing her eyes, and then immediately began coughing.

‘What-?’

‘Fire,’ he said shortly. ‘Stay low.

Smoke rises.’ Maggie was stirring now too. He crawled back to the door. No doubt about it: the rats were leaving a project. There was a confusion of voices outside, the sound of slamming doors.

That meant the fire must have already spread far. No one would have wanted to bail right away. He put his hand on the metal door handle. It was warm to the touch, but not scalding.

‘Nathaniel? Marcel? What’s going on?’ Maggie was fully awake now. Her voice was shrill, hysterical. ‘Why is it so smoky?’

‘Fire!!’ It was Natalie who answered. Her voice was, amazingly, calm.

Time to get the hell out. Before the fire spread further. He had a sudden memory of some gym class in DC-or was it Richmond?

-When all the kids had to stop,

drop, and roll onto the foot smelling linoleum. Even then, he'd known it was stupid. Like rolling would do anything but turn you into a fireball.

He grabbed the handle and pulled, but nothing happened. Tried again. Nothing. For a second, he thought maybe he was still asleep in one of his nightmares, where he tried and tried to run but couldn't, or swung at some assailant's face and didn't even make a mark. On his third try, the handle popped off in his hand. And for the first time in the whole game, he felt it: horror, building in his chest, crawling into his throat.

'What's happening?' Maggie was practically screaming now. 'Open the

door, Marcel.’

‘I can’t.’ His hands and feet felt numb. The Fear was squeezing his lungs, making it hard to breathe. No. That was the smoke. Thicker now. He unfroze. He fumbled his fingers into the hole where the door handle had been, tugging frantically, and felt a sharp bite of metal. He jammed his shoulder against the door, feeling increasingly desperate. ‘It’s stuck.’

‘What do you mean, stuck?’ Maggie started to say something else and instead started coughing.

Marcel spun around, dropped into a crouch. ‘Hold on.’ He brought his sleeve to his mouth. ‘Let me think.’ He could no longer hear any footsteps and

shouting. Has everyone else got out? He could hear, though, the progress of the fire: the muffled snapping and popping of old wood, decades of rot and ruin slurped into flame. Maggie was fumbling with her phone.

'What are you doing?' Nathaniel tried to swat at it.

'The rules said no calling for.'

'The rules?'

Maggie cut her off.

'Are you crazy?' She punched furiously at the keyboard. Her face was wild, contorted, like a wax mask that had started to melt. She let out a sound that was a cross between a scream and a sob. 'It's not working. There's no service.'

Think, think. Through the dread, Marcel carved a clear path in his mind. A goal: he needed a goal. He knew instinctively that it was his job to get the girls out safely, just like it was his job to make sure nothing bad ever happened to Dayna, his Dayna, his only sister, and best friend.

He couldn't fail again. No matter what. The window was too high-he'd never reach it. And it was so narrow… But he could give Natalie a boost… She might be able to fit. Then what? It didn't matter. Maggie might be able to squeeze through too, although he doubted it.

'Nathaniel,' he stood up. The air tasted gritty and thick. It was hot. 'Come on. You have to go through the window.'

Nathaniel started. ‘I can’t leave you.’

‘You have to, go… take your phone. Find help.’ Marcel steadied himself with one hand on the wall. He was losing it. ‘It’s the only way.’ Marcel barely saw her nod in the dark. When she stood up, he could smell her sweat. For a crazy second, he wished he could hug her, and tell her it would be okay.

But there was no time. An image of Dayna popped into his head, the mangled ruin of her car, her legs shriveling slowly to pale-white stalks, his fault.

Marcel bent down, gripped Nathaniel by the waist, helped her climb onto his shoulders. She drove a foot into his chest by accident, and he nearly lost it

and fell. He was weak. It was the goddamn smoke. But he managed to steady himself and straighten up.

‘The window!’ Nathaniel gasped.

And Maggie, somehow, understood. She fumbled for the wrench she’d spotted earlier and passed it upward.

Nathaniel swung…

There was a tinkling. A rush of air blew into the room, and after just a second a whooshing sound, as the fire-beyond the door, edging closer-sensed that air, felt it, and surged toward it, like an ocean thundering toward the beach. Black smoke poured underneath the door.

‘Go!’ Marcel shouted.

He felt Nathaniel kick his head, his ear; then she was outside.

He dropped to his knees again. He could barely see. ‘You next,’ he said to Maggie.

‘I’ll never fit.’ She said it in a whisper, but somehow, he heard. He was relieved. He didn’t think he had the strength left to lift her.

His head was spinning. ‘Lie down,’ he said, in a voice that didn’t sound like his own. She did, pressing flat against the ground. He was glad to lie down too. Lifting Nathaniel that small distance had exhausted him. It was as though the smoke was a blanket - as though it was covering him, and telling him to sleep…

He was back on the carousel again. But this time the spectators were screaming. And it had started to rain. He wanted to get off - the ride was whirling faster and faster - lights were spinning overhead- lights, spinning, voices shouting.

Sirens screaming.

Sky.

Air.

Someone-Mom? -saying,

‘You’re okay, son. You’re going to be okay.’

Part: 7

SATURDAY,

JULY 9

Maggie,

WHEN MAGGIE WOKE UP, SHE IMMEDIATELY KNEW SHE was in a hospital, which was disappointing. In movies, people were always groggy and confused and asking where they were and what had happened. But there was no mistaking the smell of disinfectant, the clean white sheets, the beep-beep-beep of medical equipment. It was pleasant-the sheets were clean and crisp; her mom and Bo weren't shouting; the air didn't reek of old alcohol. She'd slept better than she had in a long time, and for several minutes she kept her eyes closed, breathing deeply.

Then Joh- John was speaking,

quietly.

‘Come on, Maggie. We know you’re faking. I can tell your eyelid is twitching.’ Maggie opened her eyes.

Joy surged in her chest. Joh- John was sitting in a chair drawn up to the bed, leaning forward, as close as he could get without crawling into the cot with her.

Nathaniel was there too, eyes were swollen from crying, and she rocketed straight at Maggie.

‘Maggie.’ She started sobbing again. ‘Oh my God, Maggie. I was so scared.’

‘Hi, Nathaniel.’ Maggie had to speak through a mouthful of Nathaniel’s hair, which tasted like soap. She must

have showered.

‘Don’t suffocate her, Nathaniel,’ Joh- John said. Nathaniel drew back, still sniffling, but she kept a grip on Maggie’s hand, as though she were worried Maggie might float away.

Joh- John was smiling, but his face was sheet white and there were dark circles under his eyes. Maggie thought he had been sitting by her bed all night, worried she might be dying. The idea pleased her.

Maggie didn’t bother asking what had happened. It was obvious. Nathaniel had gotten help, somehow, and Maggie must have been carted off to the hospital when she was passed out. So, she asked, ‘Is Marcel okay? Where is he?’

‘Gone. He got up a few hours ago and walked out. He’s okay,’ Nathaniel said all in a rush. ‘The doctor said you’d be okay too.’

‘You won the challenge,’ Joh- John said, his face expressionless. Nathaniel shot him a look. Maggie inhaled again. When she did, she felt a sharp pain between her ribs. ‘Does my mom know?’ she asked. Nathaniel and Joh- John exchanged a glance.

‘She was here,’ Joh- John said. Maggie felt her chest seize again. She was here meaning she’d left.

Of course…?

‘Lily, too,’ he rushed on. ‘She wanted to stay. She was hysterical-’ ‘It’s

all right,' Maggie said. Joh- John was still looking at her weirdly like someone had just forced a handful of Sour Patch Kids into his mouth. It occurred to her that she must look like crap, smelled like crap too. She felt her face heat up. Great. Now she'd look like crap warmed over.

'What?' she said, trying to sound annoyed without breathing too hard.

'What is it?'

'Listen, Maggie. Something happened last night, and your' The door swung open, and Mrs. Dalcas came into the room, balancing two cups of coffee and a sandwich filmed in plastic, obviously from the cafeteria.

Mr. Dalcas was right behind her,

carrying a duffel bag Maggie recognized as belonging to Nathaniel.

‘Maggie!’ Ms. Dalcas beamed at her. ‘You’re awake.’

‘I told my parents,’ Nathaniel said unnecessarily, under her breath.

‘It’s all right,’ Maggie said again. And secretly, she was pleased that Ms. and Mr. Dalcas had come. She was suddenly worried she might cry. Mr. Dalcas’ hair was sticking straight up, and he had a grass stain on one of the knees of his khakis; Mrs. Dalcas was wearing one of her pastel cardigans, and both of them were looking at Maggie as though she had come back from the dead. She had. For the first time, she realized, really realized, how close she had come. She

swallowed rapidly, willing back the urge to cry.

‘How are you feeling, sweetheart?’ Ms. Dalcas set the coffees and sandwich on the counter and sat down on Maggie’s bed. She reached out and smoothed back Maggie’s hair; Maggie imagined, just for a second, that Ms. Dalcas was her real mother.

‘You know.’ Maggie tried and failed to smile.

‘I had my dad bring some stuff,’ Nathaniel said. Mr. Dalcas hitched the duffel bag a little higher, and it occurred to Maggie that she had lost her bag- left it in the Graybill house. It was ashes by now. ‘Magazines. And that fuzzy blanket from my basement.’ The way Nathaniel

was talking made it seem as if Maggie was going to be staying here.

‘I’m really fine.’ She sat up a little higher in bed, as though to prove it. ‘I can go home.’ ‘The doctors need to make sure there’s no damage inside,’ Ms. Dalcas said. ‘It might be a little while.’

‘Don’t worry, Maggie,’ Joh- John said quietly. He reached out and took her hand; she was startled by the softness of his touch, by the slow warmth that radiated from his fingertips through her body. ‘I’ll stay with you.’ I love you. She thought the words suddenly; this urge, like the earlier urge to cry, she had to will down.

‘Me too,’ Nathaniel said loyally.

‘Maggie needs to rest,’ Ms. Dalcas said. She was still smiling, but the corners of her eyes were creased with worry. ‘Do you remember what happened last night, honey?’

Maggie tensed. She wasn’t sure how much she should say. She looked to Nathaniel and Joh- John for cues, but both avoided her eyes. ‘Most of it,’ she said cautiously. Ms. Dalcas was still watching her extra carefully as if she were worried Maggie might suddenly crack apart or begin bleeding from the eyeballs. ‘And do you feel up to talking about it, or would you rather wait?’

Maggie’s stomach began to twist.

Why wouldn’t Joh- John, and Nathaniel look at her? ‘What do you

mean, talking about it?'

Part: 8

'The police are here,' Joh- John blurted out. 'We tried to tell you.' 'I don't get it,' Maggie said. 'They think that the fire wasn't an accident,' Joh- John said. Maggie felt like he was trying to communicate a message to her with his eyes, and she was too stupid to get it. 'Someone burned the house down on purpose.'

'But it was an accident,' Nathaniel insisted.

'For God's sake, both of you.'

Ms. Dalcas rarely lost her temper; Maggie was surprised to even hear her say 'God.' 'Stop it. You're not

doing anybody any good by lying. This is because of that game-Fright, or whatever you call it. Don't try to pretend it isn't. The police know. It's all over.

Honestly, I would have expected better.

Especially from you, Joh- John.' Joh- John opened his mouth, then closed it again. Maggie wondered whether he'd been about to defend himself. But that would mean selling out Maggie and Nathaniel. She felt ashamed. Fear. The word seemed horrible spoken out-loud, here, in this clean white place.

Ms. Dalcas's voice turned gentle again. 'You'll have to tell them the truth, Maggie,' she said. 'Tell them everything you know.'

Maggie was starting to freak. ‘But I don’t know anything,’ she said. She pulled her hand away from Joh- John’s; her palm was starting to sweat. ‘Why do they need to talk to me? I didn’t do anything.’

‘Someone is dead, Maggie,’ Ms. Dalcas said. ‘It’s very serious.’ For a second, Maggie was sure she’d misheard. ‘What?’ Ms. Dalcas looked stricken. ‘I thought you knew.’ She turned to Nathaniel. ‘I was sure you would have told her.’ Nathaniel said nothing.

Maggie turned to Joh- John. Her head took a very long time to move on her neck. ‘Who?’ She said.

‘Little Bill Kelly,’ Joh- John said. He tried to find her hand again, but she

pulled away.

Maggie couldn’t speak for a moment. The last time she’d seen Little Bill Kelly, he was sitting at a bus stop, feeding pigeons from the cup of his hands. When she’d smiled at him, he waved cheerfully and said, ‘Hiya, Christy.’ Maggie had no idea who Christy was. She’d barely known Little Kelly-he was older than she was and had been away for years in the army.

‘I don’t-’ Maggie swallowed. Mr. and Ms. Dalcas were listening closely. ‘But he wasn’t -’ ‘He was in the basement,’ Joh- John said. His voice broke.

‘Nobody knew. You couldn’t have known.’ Maggie closed her eyes. Color

bloomed behind her eyelids. Fireworks. Fire… smoke in the darkness. She opened her eyes again.

Mr. Dalcas had gone into the hall. The door was partly open. She heard murmured voices, the squeak of someone's shoes on the tile floor. He poked his head back in the room. He looked almost apologetic.

'The police are here, Maggie,' he said.

'It's time.'

Part: 9

MONDAY, JULY

Marcel,

'CAN I HAVE SOME WATER,

PLEASE?’

Marcel wasn’t thirsty, but he wanted a second to sit, catch his breath, and look around.

‘Sure thing.’ The police officer who had greeted Marcel and ushered him into a small, windowless office- OFFICER-SADOWSKI, read his name tag-hadn’t stopped smiling like he was a teacher and Marcel was his favorite student.

‘You just sit tight. I’ll be right back.’

Marcel sat very still while he waited, just in case someone was watching.

He didn’t have to turn his head to take in nearly everything: the desk, piled

high with manila file folders; the shelves stacked with more papers; a prehistoric telephone, unplugged; photographs of several- fat, smiling babies; a desk fan. It was a good thing, he thought, that Sadowski hadn't brought him into an interrogation room.

Sadowski was back in only a minute, carrying a Styrofoam cup full of water. He was on a mission to seem approachable. 'You relaxed? Happy with the water? You don't want a beverage or anything?'

'I'm fine.' Marcel took a sip of the water and nearly choked.

'It was piss-warm.'

Sadowski either didn't notice or

pretended not to. ‘Glad you decided to come down and talk to us.

Dan, right?’

‘Marcel,’ Mason said, who was just sucking air and taking up space. ‘Marcel.’ He said again, then Sadowski had taken a seat behind his desk. He made a big show of shuffling around some papers, grinning like an idiot, twirling a pen, and leaning back in his chair. All casual. But Marcel noticed that he had Marcel’s name written down on a piece of white paper.

‘Right. Right. Marcel. Hard to forget. So- what can I do you for, Marcel?’

Marcel wasn’t buying the village idiot act, not for a second. Officer

Sadowski’s eyes were narrow and smart. His jaw was like a right triangle.

He’d be a mean old bastard when he felt like it.

‘I’m here to talk about the fire,’ Marcel said. ‘I figured you’d want to talk to me eventually.’ It had been two days since Marcel had woken up in the hospital. Two days of waiting for the knock on the door, for the police officers to show up and start grilling him. The waiting, the tickling feeling of anxiety, was worse than anything.

So earlier that morning he’d woken with a resolution: he wouldn’t wait anymore.

‘You’re the young man who left

the hospital on Saturday morning, aren't you?' Right. As though he'd forgotten. 'We just missed talking to you. Why'd you run off in such a hurry?' 'My sister - needs help.' He realized, belatedly, he shouldn't have mentioned his sister. It would only lead to bad places.

But Sadowski seized on it. 'What kind of help?'

'She's in a wheelchair,' Marcel said, with some effort. He hated saying the words out loud. It made them seem more real, and final.

Sadowski nodded sympathetically.

'That's right. She was in a car accident a few years ago, wasn't she?'

D*ick… So, the village idiot thing

was a trick. He'd done his homework.

'Yup,' Marcel said. He thought Sadowski would ask him more about it, but he just shook his head and muttered, 'Shame.' Marcel started to relax. He took a sip of water. He was glad he'd come. It made him look confident. He was confident.

Then Sadowski said, abruptly, 'Have you ever heard of a game called Fear, Marcel?'

Marcel was glad he'd already finished swallowing, so he couldn't choke. He shrugged. 'I don't know. I never had too many friends around here.'

'You have a few friends,' Sadowski said. Marcel didn't know what

he was getting at. He consulted his page of notes again. ‘Maggie Nill. Natalie Dalcas. Someone must have invited you to that party.’ That was the story that had gone around: a party in the Graybill House.

A bunch of kids getting together to smoke weed, drink alcohol, freak one another out. Then: a stray spark. An accident. The blame was spread around that way, and couldn't be pinned to anyone specific. Of course, Marcel knew it was all bullsh*t. Someone had lit the place up, deliberately. It was part of the challenge.

‘Well, yes. Them. But they’re not friends- friends.’ Marcel felt himself blushing. He wasn’t sure whether he’d

been caught in a lie.

Sadowski made a noise in the back of his throat Marcel didn't know how to interpret. 'Why don't you tell me all about it? In your own words, at your own pace.'

Marcel told him, speaking slowly, so he wouldn't screw it up, but not too slowly, so he wouldn't seem nervous.

He told Sadowski he'd been invited by Maggie; there'd been rumors of a keg party, but when he got there, he found out it was pretty lame, and there was hardly any booze at all. He hadn't been drinking.

(He congratulated himself on thinking of this-he wouldn't get in trouble

for anything, period.) Sadowski interrupted him only once. ‘So why the closed room?’

Marcel was startled. ‘What?’ Sadowski only pretended to glance down at the report. ‘The fire chiefs had to break down the door to get to you and the girl-Maggie. Why’d you go off with her if the party was raging somewhere else?’

Marcel kept his hands on his thighs.

He didn’t even blink. ‘I told you, the party was lame. Besides, I was hoping -’ He trailed off suggestively, raising his eyebrows.

Sadowski got it. ‘Ah. I see. Go on.’

There wasn’t much else to tell;

Marcel told him he must have fallen asleep next to Maggie. The next thing he knew, they heard people running and smelled smoke. He didn't mention Nathaniel.

No need to explain how she'd known to direct the firefighters to the back of the house unless he was asked. For a while, after Marcel finished talking, they sat in silence. Sadowski appeared to be doodling, but Marcel knew this, too, was an act. He'd heard everything. Finally- Officer Sadowski sighed, set down his pen, and rubbed his eyes.

'It's tough sh*t, Marcel. Tough sh*t.' Marcel said nothing.

Sadowski went on. 'Bill Kelly was -is-a friend. He was on the force. Little

Kelly went to Iraq. Do you know what I'm saying?'

'Not really,' Marcel said.

Sadowski stared at him. 'I'm saying we're going to figure out exactly what happened that night. And if we find out the fire was started on purpose.'

He shook his head. 'That's a homicide, Marcel.'

Marcel's throat was dry. But he forced himself not to look away. 'It was an accident,' he said. 'Wrong place, wrong time.' Sadowski smiled. But there was no humor in it. 'I hope so.' Marcel decided to walk home. He was out of cigarettes and in a bad mood.

Now he wasn't so sure that going

to the police officers had been a clever idea. The way Sadowski looked at him made him feel like the police officers thought he'd started the damn fire. It was the judges who had to be, whoever they were.

Any one of the players could squeal about the game, and that would be the end of that. If Fear ended - Marcel had no plans beyond winning Fear-beating Ray in the final round of Joust and making sure it was a hard, bloody win. He hadn't thought of his life beyond that moment at all.

He'd be arrested. He'd go out in ablaze. He didn't care either way. Dayna, his Dayna, had been destroyed, ruined forever, and someone had to pay.

But for the first time, he was seized with the fear that the game would end, and he would never get his chance. And then he would just have to live with the new Dayna on her plant-stalk legs, live with the knowledge that he'd been unable to save her. Live with knowing Ray and Luke were fine, going through the world, breathing, and grinning and sh*tting and crapping on other people's lives too.

And that was impossible.

Unimaginable.

The sun was bright and high. Everything was still, gripped in the hard light. There was a bad taste in Marcel's mouth; he hadn't eaten yet today. He checked his phone, hoping Nathaniel

might have called: nothing. They'd spoken the day before, a halting conversation, full of pauses. When Nathaniel said her dad needed her downstairs and she had to get off the phone, he was sure she'd been lying.

Marcel circumnavigated Dot's Diner, checking instinctively to see whether he could spot his mom behind the smudgy glass windows. But the sun was too bright and turned everyone into shadow.

He heard a burst of laughter from inside the house. He paused with his hand on the door. If his mom was home, he wasn't sure he could deal. She'd been practically hysterical when he came home with a hospital bracelet, and since then

she’d been giving him the fish-eye and grilling him every .5 seconds about how he was feeling like she couldn’t trust him even to pee without risking death. Plus, the news about Little Kelly was all over Dot’s Diner, and when she wasn’t demanding whether Marcel thought he had a fever, she was gossiping about the tragedy.

But then the laughter sounded again, and he realized it wasn’t his mom laughing-it was Dayna. She was sitting on the couch, a blanket draped over her legs. Ricky was sitting in a folding chair across from her; the chessboard was positioned on the coffee table. When Marcel entered, there were only a few inches between them.

‘No, no,’ she was saying, between fits of giggling. ‘The knight moves diagonally.’

‘Diag-on-alley,’ Ricky repeated, in his heavily accented English, and knocked over one of Dayna’s pawns.

‘It’s not your turn!’ She shed her pawn back and let out another burst of laughter. Marcel cleared his throat. Dayna looked up.

‘Marcel!’ she cried. Both she and

Ricky jerked backward several inches.

‘Hey.’ He didn’t know why they both looked so guilty. He didn’t know why he felt so awkward, either-like he’d interrupted them in the middle of

something far more intense than a game of chess.

‘I was just teaching Ricky how to play,’ Dayna blurted. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were bright. She looked better, prettier than she had in a while. Marcel thought she might even be wearing makeup.

He suddenly felt angry. He was out busting his ass for Dayna, almost dying, and she was at home playing chess with Ricky on the old marble board his mom had bought on- Marcel’s eleventh birthday, and that- Marcel had schlepped everywhere they’d moved since then. Like she didn’t even care. Like he wasn’t playing Fear just for her.

‘Want to play, Marcel?’ She

asked.

But he could tell she didn't mean it. For the first time- Marcel looked, really looked, at Ricky. Could he be serious about marrying Dayna? He was twenty-one, twenty-two, tops. Dayna would never do it. The guy barely spoke any English, for Christ's sake. And she would have told- Marcel if she liked him. She'd always told- Marcel everything.

'I just came in to get a drink,'

Marcel said. 'I'm going out again.' In the kitchen, he filled a glass with water and kept the sink running while he drank, to drown out the sound of muffled conversation from the next room. What the hell were they talking about? What did they have in common? When he

shut off the sink, the voices fell abruptly into silence again.

Jesus…

Marcel felt like he was trespassing in his own house. He left without saying goodbye. As soon as he shut the door, he heard laughter again. He checked his phone. He had a response from Maggie, finally. He'd texted her earlier: Heard anything? Her text reads simply: Game over. Marcel felt a surge of nausea riding up from his stomach to his throat. And he knew, then, what he had to do.

Marcel had been to the Hanrahan's house only once before, two years earlier, when Dayna was still in the hospital- when, briefly, it had seemed like

she might not wake up. Marcel hadn't budged from the chair next to her bed except to pee and smoke cigarettes in the parking lot and get coffee from the cafeteria.

Finally, Marcel's mom had convinced him to go home and get some rest. He had gone home, but not to rest. He had stopped in only long enough to remove the butcher's knife from the kitchen and the baseball bat from the closet, along with a pair of old ski gloves that had never, as far as he knew, been used by anyone in his family.

It took him a while to find Ray and- Luke's house on his bike, in the dark, half-delirious from the heat and no sleep and the rage that was strangling him,

coiled like a snake around his gut and throat. But he did, finally: a two-story structure, all dark, that might have been nice one hundred years ago. Now it looked like a person whose soul had been sucked out through his asshole: collapsed and desperate, wild, and wide-eyed, sagging in the middle. Marcel felt a flash of pity.

He thought of the tiny apartment behind Dot's, how his mom put daffodils in old pickle jars on the windowsills and scrubbed the walls with bleach every Sunday. Then he remembered what he had come to do. He left his bike on the side of the road, slipped on his gloves, removed the baseball bat and knife from his duffel bag.

He stood there, willing his feet to move. A swift kick to the door, the sound of screaming. The knife flashing in the dark, the whistle of the bat cutting through the air. He was after Luke and Luke alone...

It would be easy…

Quick…

But he hadn’t managed it. He’d stood there with his legs numb, heavy, useless, for what felt like hours, until he began to fear that he’d never move again- he’d be frozen in this position, in the darkness, forever.

At some point, the porch light had clicked on, and Marcel had seen a heavy woman, with a face like a pulpy fruit,

wearing a tent-like nightgown and no shoes, maneuver her bulk out onto the porch and light up a cigarette. Luke's mother. All at once, Marcel could move again. He had stumbled toward his bike.

It wasn't until he was four blocks away that he realized he was still holding the knife and he had dropped the baseball bat on the lawn. It had been two whole years, to the day.

Ray's house looked even more run-down in the daylight. The paint was shedding like gray dandruff. On the porch were two tires, a few smelly armchairs, and an old porch swing hanging on rusty chains, which looked like it would collapse under the slightest pressure. There was a doorbell, but it was

disconnected. Instead Marcel banged loudly on the frame of the screen door.

In response, the TV inside was abruptly muted. For the first time, it occurred to Marcel that it might not be Ray who answered the door, but that pulpy woman from two years ago-or a father or someone else entirely. But it was Ray. He was wearing only basketball shorts. For a split second, he hesitated, obviously startled, just behind the screen.

Before Marcel could say anything, Ray kicked open the screen door. Marcel had to jump back to avoid it. He lost his footing.

‘What the freak are you doing here?’ The sudden motion had screwed Marcel up. He was already off-balance

when Ray grabbed him by the shirt and then shoved him.

Marcel stumbled down the porch stairs and landed in the dirt on his elbows. He bit down on his tongue. And Ray was above him, in a rage, ready to pounce.

‘You must be out of your mind,’ he spat out. Marcel rolled away from him and scrambled to his feet. ‘I’m not here to fight.’

Ray let out a bark of laughter. ‘You don’t have a choice.’ He took a step forward, swinging; but Marcel had regained his balance and sidestepped him.

‘Look.’ Marcel held up a hand.

‘Just listen to me, okay? I came to talk.’ ‘Why the hell would I want to talk to you?’ Ray said. His hands were still balled into fists, but he didn’t try and swing again.

‘We both want the same thing,’ Marcel said.

Part: 10

For a second, Ray said nothing. His hands uncurled. ‘What’s that?’ ‘Fear.’ Marcel wet his lips. His throat was dry. ‘Both of us need them.’ There was an electric tension in the air, hot and dangerous. Ray took another quick step forward.

‘Luke told me about your little threats,’ Ray said. ‘What kind of game do

you think you're playing?' Ray was so close; Marcel could smell cornflakes and sour milk on his breath. But he didn't step back.

'There's only one game that matters,' he said. 'You know it. Luke knew it too. That's why he did what he did, isn't it?' For the first time, Ray looked afraid. 'It was an accident,' he said.

'He never meant-'

'Don't…!' Ray shook his head. 'I didn't know,' he said. Marcel knew he was lying.

'Are you going to help me, or not?' Marcel asked. Ray laughed again: an explosive, humorless sound. 'Why should I help you?' he asked. 'You want

me dead.’ Marcel smiled. ‘Not like this,’ he said. And he meant it, 100 percent. ‘Not yet.’

Sometime around midnight, when Carp was quiet, dazzling in a light sheen of rain, Even Seller woke in the dark to rough hands grabbing him. Before he could scream, he was gagging at the taste of cotton in his mouth. A sock, and then he was lifted, carried out of bed and into the night.

His first, confused, thought was that the police officers had come to take him away. If he’d been thinking clearly, he would have realized that his assailants were wearing ski masks.

He would have noticed that the trunk they forced him into belonged to a

navy-blue Taurus, like the kind his brother drove. That it was his brother's car, parked in its usual spot.

But he wasn't thinking clearly. He was Feared. Kicking out, watching the sky narrow to a sliver as the trunk closed over him, Even felt something wet and realized that, for the first time since he was five years old, he'd peed himself.

At last, he realized too that despite everything, the game was ongoing. And that he had just lost.

WEDNESDAY,

JULY 13

Maggie,

THE WAR MEETING TOOK

PLACE AT JOH- JOHN'S HOUSE. IT had to. Maggie's trailer was too small, Marcel wouldn't have invited them to his place, and Nathaniel's parents were home all day doing a garage clean. Maggie had to bring Lily.

Lily had nothing to do now that school was over, and most days took the bus by herself a half-hour to Hudson, where the library was. But the library was understaffed and closed for a week while the director was on vacation. For once, Lily was in a good mood, even though she was dirty and sweaty and stank like horses; in the morning, she'd helped Maggie at Anne's.

She sang a song about white Bengals to Joh- John's house and made

waves with her arm out the window. Joh-John lived in the woods. His father had once owned an antique store and pawnshop, and Joh- John liked to say his dad ‘collected’ things.

Maggie always threatened to sign them up for that TV show about hoarders. The house and the yard around it was littered with stuff, from junk to bizarre: at least two to three old cars at all times, in various states of repair; crates of spray paint; rusted slides; stacks of timber; old furniture, half-embedded in the soil. Lily ran off, yelling, weaving through the old piles.

Maggie found Nathaniel and Joh-John behind the house, sitting on an old merry-go-round, which no longer turned.

Joh- John looked as though he hadn’t slept in days. He pulled Maggie into a hug as soon as he saw her, which was weird. She tensed up; she smelled like stables.

‘What’s up with you?’ Maggie said when he pulled away. The circles under his eyes were as dark as a bruise.

‘Just glad to see you,’ he said.

‘You look like crap.’ She reached out to smooth down his hair, an old habit. But he caught her wrist. He was staring at her intensely like he wanted to memorize her face.

‘Maggie-,’ he started to say.

‘Maggie!’ Nathaniel called out at the same time. She, at least, seemed

unaffected by Bill Kelly's death. 'I mean, it's not like we knew him,' she'd said days earlier when Maggie had told her how guilty she felt.

Maggie didn't wait for Nathaniel to speak, although Nathaniel had called the meeting. 'I'm out,' she said. 'I'm not playing anymore.'

'We have to wait for Marcel,' Nathaniel said.

'I don't have to wait for anyone,'

Maggie said. She was annoyed by Nathaniel's calm. She was blinking happily, sleepily, in the sun-as though nothing had happened. 'I'm not playing anymore.

It's as simple as that.'

‘It’s sick,’ Joh- John said fiercely.

‘Sick. Anyone in their right minds-’ ‘The judges aren’t in their right minds, though, are they?’ Nathaniel said, turning to him. ‘I mean, they can’t be. You heard about Even?’

‘That wasn’t-’ Joh- John abruptly stopped speaking, shaking his head.

‘I, for one, don’t plan on losing my chance at sixty-seven thousand dollars,’ Nathaniel said, still with that infuriating calm. Then she shook her head. ‘It isn’t right to start without Marcel.’

‘Why?’ Maggie fired back. ‘Why are you so worried about- Marcel? I made the deal with you, remember?’ Nathaniel

looked away, and then Maggie knew. A bitter taste rushed into her throat. ‘You made a deal with him, too,’ she said. ‘You lied to me.’

‘No.’ Nathaniel looked at her, eyes wide, pleading. ‘No. Maggie. I never planned on cutting him in.’

‘What are you talking about?’

Joh- John asked. ‘What do you mean,

‘cutting him in’?’

‘Stay out of it, Joh- John,’ Maggie said.

‘I’m in it,’ he said. He dragged a hand through his hair, and in that instant, Maggie felt they would never get back to

normal: to make fun of Joh- John's hair, to load it with gel and twisting to make it stick straight up. 'You're at my house, remember?'

'This isn't a game anymore,' Maggie said. Everything was spiraling out of control. 'Don't you get it? Someone's dead.'

'Jesus.' Joh- John sat down heavily, rubbing his eyes, as though Maggie saying the words had made them real.

'Why did you play, Maggie?' Nathaniel stood up when Joh- John sat down. Her arms were crossed, and she made little clicking noises with her tongue.

Rhythmic… A pattern. ‘If you didn’t want the risk if you couldn’t handle it, why did you play? Because Matt stupid Hefley dumped you? Because he was sick of getting blue-balled by his girlfriend?’ Maggie lost her breath. She was conscious of the air going out of her at once, escaping in a short hiss. Joh- John looked up and spoke sharply: ‘Nathaniel.’

Even Natalie looked surprised and immediately guilty. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said quickly, avoiding Maggie’s eyes. ‘I didn’t mean-’

‘What did I miss?’ Maggie turned. Marcel had just appeared, emerging from the glittering maze of junk and scrap metal. She wondered what they looked like to him: Nathaniel flushed and guilty,

Joh- John awful white, wild-eyed; and Maggie blinking back tears, still sweaty from the stables. And all of them angry: you could feel it in the air, a physical force among them.

Suddenly Maggie realized that this, too, because of the game. That it was part of it.

Only Marcel seemed unaware of the tension. ‘Mind if I smoke?’ He asked Joh- John. Joh- John shook his head.

Maggie broke in. ‘I’m out. I said I was out, and I meant it. The game should have ended…’

‘The game never ends,’ Marcel said. Nathaniel turned away from him and for a moment, just a moment, he looked

uncertain. Maggie was relieved. Marcel had changed this summer. He wasn't the slope-shouldered weirdo, the outsider, who had sat for three years in silence. It was as though the game was feeding him somehow like he was growing on it.

'You heard about Even?' He exhaled a straight stream of smoke. 'That was me.'

Nathaniel had turned back to him. 'You?'

'Me, and Ray Hanrahan.'

There was a moment of silence.

Maggie finally managed to speak.

'What?'

'We did it.' Marcel took a final

drag and ground out the cigarette butt underneath the heel of his cowboy boot.

‘That’s against the rules,’ Maggie said. ‘The judges set the challenges.’ Marcel shook his head. ‘It’s Fear,’ he said. ‘There are no rules.’ ‘Why?’ Joh- John tugged at his left ear. He was furious and trying not to show it; that was his tell.

‘To send a message to the judges. The players, too. The game will go on, one way or another. It has to.’

‘You don’t have the right,’ Joh-John said.

Marcel shrugged. ‘What’s right?’ he said. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘What about the cops? And the fire? What about Bill?’ No one said

anything. Maggie realized she was shaking.

‘I’m done,’ she said. She spun around and nearly collided with a rusty-spotted furnace, which, along with an overturned bike, marked the beginning of the narrow path that wound through the landscape of litter and junk to the house, and around to the front yard. Joh- John called out to her, but she ignored him. She found Lily crouching in a bit of yard uncluttered by junk, marking the bare grass with bright-blue spray paint she had unearthed somewhere.

‘Lily…’ Maggie spoke sharply. Lily dropped the paint and stood up, looking guilty.

‘We’re going,’ Maggie said.

Lily’s frown reappeared, as did the small pucker between her eyebrows. Immediately, she seemed to shrink and age.

Maggie thought of the night she had whispered, ‘Are you going to die?’ and felt a fist of guilt hit her hard in the stomach. She didn’t know whether she was doing the right thing. She felt like nothing she did was right.

But what had happened to Bill Kelly was wrong. And pretending it hadn’t happened was wrong too. That, she knew.

‘What’s the matter with you?’ Lily said, sticking out her lower lip.

‘Nothing.’ Maggie seized her wrist. ‘Come on.’

‘I didn’t get to say hi to Joh-John,’

Lily whined…

‘Next time,’ Maggie said. She practically dragged Lily to the car. She couldn’t hear Nathaniel or Joh- John or Marcel anymore; she wondered whether they were talking about her. She couldn’t get out of there fast enough. She drove in silence, gripping the wheel as though it was in danger of slipping suddenly from her hands.

WEDNESDAY,

JULY 20

Maggie,

THE WEATHER TURNED FOUL,

COLD AND WET, AND THE ground turned to sludge. For two days, Maggie heard nothing from Nathaniel. She refused to be the one to call first. She texted back and forth with Joh- John but avoided seeing him, which meant that to go to work she had to bus it to the 7-Eleven and walk three-quarters of a mile in the driving rain, arriving wet and miserable just to stand for more hours in the rain, chucking the chickens soggy feed and hauling equipment into the sheds so it wouldn't rust.

Only the white Bengal's seemed more miserable than she was; she wondered, as they huddled underneath a canopy of maple trees, watching her work, whether they dreamed of other

places as much as she did. Africa, burnt grasses, a vast round sun. For the first time, it struck her as selfish that Anne kept them here, in this ceroplastic climate of blistering heat, followed by rain, followed by snow and sleet and ice.

There were rumors that the police had turned up evidence of arson at the Graybill House. For an entire day, Maggie waited in agony, certain that the evidence had to do with her duffel bag, positive that the police would haul her off to jail. What would happen to her, if she were accused of murder? She was eighteen. That meant she would go to real jail, not juvenile.

But when several more days passed, and no one came looking for her,

she relaxed again. She hadn't been the one to light the stupid match. When you thought about it, this was all Matt Hefley's fault. He should be arrested.

And Delaney, too. About Fear, there was not a single whisper. Marcel's move had failed to rouse the judges to act. Maggie wondered whether he would try again, then reminded herself it was no longer her business. Still, it rained: this was mid-July in upstate New York, lush and green and wet as a rainforest.

Krista got sick from the humidity and the wetness in the air, saying it made her lungs feel clotty. Maggie refrained from pointing out that her lungs might feel better if she stopped smoking a pack of menthol cigarettes a day. Krista called

in sick to work and instead lay on the couch in a daze of cold medicine like something dead and bloated dragged up by the ocean.

At least Maggie could use the car. The library had reopened. She dropped-Lily there…

‘Want me to pick you up later?’ She asked.

Lily was back to being snotty. ‘I’m not a baby,’ she said as she slid out of the car, not even bothering with the umbrella Maggie had brought for her.

‘I’ll buy it.’

‘What about-?’ Before Maggie could remind her to take the umbrella, Lily had slammed the door and was

dashing for the library entrance through a slow ooze of dark puddles. Despite the rain, Maggie was in a decent mood. Lily was twelve. It was normal for her to be a brat. It was even a good thing.

It showed she was growing up okay, the way that everyone else did that maybe she wouldn't be messed up just because she'd grown up in Fresh Pines with ants parading all over the spoons and Krista fumigating the house. And there was still no police knocking on her door, still not a single, solitary breath about- Fright.

Work was hard: Anne wanted her to muck the stables, and afterward, they had to re-caulk a portion of the basement, where the rain was coming in and the

walls were speckled with mold.

Maggie was shocked when Anne stopped her for the day. It was five p.m., but Maggie hadn't noticed time passing, had barely looked up. The rain was worse than ever. It came down in whole sheets, like the quivering blades of a giant guillotine.

While Anne was preparing her cup of tea, Maggie checked her phone for the first time in hours, and her stomach went to liquid and pooled straight down to her feet. She had missed twelve calls from Lily. Her throat squeezed up so tight she could hardly breathe. She punched Lily's number at once. Her cell phone went straight to voicemail.

'What is the matter, Maggie?'

Anne was standing at the oven, her gray hair frizzing around her face, like a strange halo.

Maggie said, ‘I have to go.’

Afterward, she did not remember getting into the car or backing it down the driveway; she did not remember the drive to the library, but suddenly she was there. She parked the car but left the door open. Some of the puddles were ankle-deep, but she hardly noticed. She sprinted to the entrance; the library had been closed for an hour.

She called Lily’s name, circled the parking lot, searching for her. She scanned the streets as she drove, imagining all the terrible things that might have happened to Lily- like- she had

been hurt, scared, killed-and trying to stop herself from losing it, throwing up, or breaking down.

Finally, she had no choice but to go home. She'd have to call the police. Maggie fought back another wave of-Terror. This was it, the real thing. The road leading to 'Fresh Pines' was full of ruts, sucking black mud, deep water.

Maggie bumped through it, tires spinning and grinding. The place looked sadder than usual: the rain was beating fists on the trailers, pulling down wind chimes and overflowing outdoor fire pits.

Maggie hadn't even stopped the car when she spotted Lily: huddled underneath a skinny birch tree missing most of its leaves, only fifteen feet away

from the trailer steps, arms wrapped around her legs, shivering.

Maggie must have parked because suddenly, she was rocketing out of the car, splashing through the water, taking Lily in her arms.

‘Lily!’ Maggie could not hug her sister tight enough. Here, here, here.

Safe. ‘Are you okay? Are you, all right? What happened?’

‘I’m cold.’ Lily’s voice was muffled. She spoke into Maggie’s left shoulder. Maggie’s heart seized up; she would have spun the world in reverse for a blanket.

‘Come on,’ she said, pulling away.

‘Let’s get you inside.’ Lily reared back, like a bucking horse. Her eyes went huge, wild. ‘I won’t go in there,’ she said. ‘I don’t want to go in there!’

‘Lily.’ Maggie blinked rain out of her eyes, crouching down so she was eye level with her sister. Lily’s lips were ringed with blue. God. How long had she been out here? ‘What’s going on?’

‘Mom told me to go away,’ Lily said. Her voice had turned small, broken. ‘She-she told me to play outside.’

Something inside Maggie cracked, and at that moment- she was conscious that all her life she had been building up walls and defenses in preparation for something like this; behind them, the pressure had been

mounting, mounting. Now the dam broke, and she was flooded, drowning in rage and hate.

‘Come on,’ she said. She was surprised she still sounded the same when inside of her was a sucking blackness, a furious noise. She took Lily’s hand. ‘You can sit in the car, okay? I will turn on the heat. You’ll be nice and dry.’

She brought Lily to the car. There was an old T-shirt in the back- Krista’s, reeking of smoke-but it was dry, at least. She helped Lily wriggle out of her wet shirt.

She untied Lily’s shoes for her, and peeled off her wet socks, then made Lily press her feet up to the vents where the heat had begun to blow. The whole

time Lily was limp, obedient as if all the life had been washed out of her. Maggie moved mechanically.

'I'll be right back,' she told Lily. She felt detached from the words, as though she wasn't the one speaking. The anger was drumming out the knowledge of everything else.

Boom, boom, and boom.

There was music coming from the trailer, practically shaking the walls.

The lights were on too, although the blinds were down; she could see a figure swaying in silhouette, dancing. She had not noticed before because she had been too worried about Lily. She kept seeing the little figure huddled

underneath the pathetic birch- the single tree that Fresh Pines boasted. Mom told me to go away. She told me to play outside.

Boom, boom, boom.

She was at the door. Locked. From inside, she heard a shriek of laughter. Somehow, she fit the key in the lock; that must mean she wasn't shaking. Strange, she thought, and: Maybe I could have won Fear. She pushed the door open and stepped inside.

There were three of them: Krista, Bo, and Maureen, from Lot 99. They froze, and Maggie froze too. She was seized momentarily by the sense that she'd entered a play and had forgotten all her lines-she couldn't breathe, didn't

know what to do. The lights were high, bright. They looked like actors, all three of the actors you see too close.

They were too made up. But the makeup was horrible. It looked as though it was beginning to melt, slowly deforming their faces. Their eyes were bright, glittering: doll eyes. Maggie took in everything at once: the blue haze of smoke. The empty beer bottles, the overflowing cups used as ashtrays, the single bottle of Georgi vodka, half empty.

And the small blue plastic plate on the table, still faintly outlined with the imprint of the Sesame Street characters - Lily’s old plate-now covered with thin lines of fine white powder. All of it hit Maggie like a physical blow, a quick sock

to the stomach. Her world went black for a second. The plate. Lily's plate.

Then the moment passed. Krista brought a cigarette unsteadily to her lips, missing. 'Maggie Lynn,' she slurred. She patted her shirt, her breasts, as though expecting to find a lighter there. 'What are you doing, baby? Why are you staring at me like I'm a-' Maggie lunged…?

Before her mother finished speaking before, she could think about what she was doing, all of the rages traveled down into her arms and legs and she picked up the blue plate, crisscrossed with powder like it had been scarred by something, and threw.

Maureen screamed, and Bo shouted. Krista barely managed to duck.

She tried to right herself and, staggering backward, managed to land on

Maureen's lap, in the armchair. This made Maureen scream even louder. The plate collided with the wall with a thud, and the air was momentarily full of white powder, like indoor snow. It would have been funny if it were not so horrible.

'What the hell?' Bo took two steps toward Maggie and for a moment, she thought he might hit her. But he just stood there, fists clenched, red-faced, and enraged. 'What the hell?' Krista fought to her feet. 'Who in the goddamn do you think you are?'

Maggie was glad that they were separated by the coffee table. Otherwise, she wasn't sure what she would do. She

wanted to kill Krista. Kill her.

‘You’re disgusting.’ Her voice sounded mangled like something had wrapped around her vocal cords.

‘Get out.’ The color was rising in

Krista’s face. Her voice, too, was rising, and she was shaking as though something awful was going to detonate inside her.

‘Get out! Do you hear me? Get out!’ She reached for the vodka bottle and threw it. Fortunately, she was slow. Maggie sidestepped it easily. She heard shattering glass and felt the splash of liquid.

Bo got his arms around Krista. He managed to restrain her. She was still

shrieking, writhing like an animal, face red and twisted and awful. And suddenly all the anger, the writhing snake in Maggie's stomach, was released. She felt absolutely nothing. No pain. No anger. No fear. Nothing but disgust. She felt, weirdly, as if she were floating above the scene, hovering in her own body. She turned and went to her bedroom. She checked her top drawer first, in the plastic jewelry box where she kept her earnings. Everything was gone but forty dollars. Of course. Her mom had stolen it.

This didn't bring a fresh wave of anger, only a new kind of disgust.

Animals. They were animals, and Krista was the worst of them. She pocketed the twenties and moved quickly

through the room, stuffing things in Lily's backpack: shoes, pants, shirts, underwear. When the backpack was full, she bundled things up in one of the comforters.

They would need a blanket, anyway. And toothbrushes. She remembered reading in a magazine once that toothbrushes were the number one item travelers forgot to pack. But she wouldn't forget.

She was calm, thinking straight. She had it all together. She slid the backpack onto one of her shoulders; it was so small; she couldn't fit it correctly.

Poor Lily…

She wanted to get food from the

kitchen, but that would mean walking past her mom and Bo and Maureen. She'd have to skip it. There probably wasn't much she could use, anyway. At the last second, she took the rose off her dresser, the one Joh- John had made her from metal and wire. It would be good luck.

She hefted the blanket in her arms, now heavy with all the clothing and shoes it contained and shuffled sideways out of the bedroom door.

She'd been worried her mom would try and stop her, but she shouldn't have been. Krista was sitting on the couch, crying, with Maureen's arms around her. Her hair was a stringy mess. Maggie heard her say, '…???... did everything - on my own.' Only half the

words were audible. She was too messed up to speak clearly.

Bo was gone…

He’d split since the drugs were nothing but carpet crumbs now. He’d left to get more. Maggie pushed out the door. It didn’t matter. She’d never see Bo again.

She’d never see her mother or Maureen, or the inside of that trailer again. For one second, she could have sobbed, going down the porch steps. Never again -the idea filled her with relief so strong, it almost turned her knees to water and made her trip.

But she couldn’t cry, not yet. She had to be strong for Lily. Lily had fallen asleep in the front seat, her mouth open,

her hair feathering slightly in the heat. Finally, her lips weren't blue anymore, and she was no longer shivering.

She didn't open her eyes until they were just bouncing out of the entrance to the Pines and onto Route 51- like its- so-o deadly.

'Maggie?' She said in a small voice.

'What's up, Billy?' Maggie tried to smile and couldn't.

'I don't want to go back there.' Lily turned and rested her forehead against the window. In the glass's reflection, her face was narrow and pale, like a tapered flame. Maggie tightened her fingers on the wheel. 'We're not going

back there,' she said. Weirdly, the words made the taste of sickness come up. 'We're never going back, okay? I promise.'

'Where will we go?' Lily asked.

Maggie reached over and squeezed Lily's knee. Her jeans had finally dried.

'We'll figure something out. Okay?

We're going to be just fine.' The rain was still coming down in sheets; the car carved waves in the road, sending liquid rivers sloshing toward the gutters. 'You trust me, right?' Maggie asked. Lily nodded without turning her face away from the window.

‘We’re going to be fine,’ Maggie repeated, and returned both hands to the wheel, gripping tightly.

They couldn’t, she realized, go to Joh- John’s or Nathaniel’s. She’d taken her mom’s car and had no intention of returning it, which counted as stealing.

And her friends’ houses would be the first place her mom would think of looking when she sobered up and realized what had happened. Would she call the police? Would they track Maggie down? Her mom would convince them that Maggie was a delinquent, and they would try to pin the fire on her. But there was no point in worrying about that yet.

No one could know. It came down to that. She and Lily would have to be

very, very careful about the next few weeks. As soon as they had enough money to leave Carp, they would. And until then, they had to hide. They'd have to hide the car, too, and use it only at night.

The idea came to her suddenly: Meth Row. The whole road was cluttered with old cars and abandoned houses. No one would notice one sh*ttier car was parked there.

Lily had fallen asleep again and was snoring quietly. Meth Row looked even bleaker than usual. The rain had turned the pitted road to sludge, and Maggie had trouble just keeping the wheel from jerking under her hands. It was hard to tell which houses were

occupied and which weren't, but she finally found a spot next to a storage shed and an old Buick, stripped nearly to its metal frame, where she could angle the car, so it was mostly unseen from the road.

She turned off the engine. No point in wasting gas. They'd have to be careful about wasting anything now.

They'd be more comfortable in the backseat, but since Lily was already asleep and Maggie doubted, she would sleep at all it wasn't even six o'clock -she reached into the back and shook out all the things from the comforter. Stuff that had only an hour ago been littering their beds, the floor of their bedroom.

Their home…

Homeless…

It was the first time the word occurred to her, and she pushed it out of her mind. It was an ugly word, a word that smelled. Runaways were better, a little more glam.

She spread the comforter over Lily, careful not to wake her. She found a hoodie in the back and put it on over her shirt, pulled up the hood, cinched the drawstrings tight.

Thankfully it was summer and wouldn't get too cold. It occurred to her that she should turn her cell phone off too, to conserve battery power. But before she did, she typed out a text to Nathaniel and Marcel. She included Joh- John too. Like he'd said, he was in it, one way or

another.

Changed my mind, she wrote. I'm back in.

She was playing for keeps now.

For Lily. Forget the promise she'd made to Nathaniel. The money would be hers, and hers alone.

That night, long after Maggie had finally drifted off, head back in the front seat of the Taurus-when Nathaniel was curled up in bed with her computer, searching for funny videos-when even the bars were shutting down and the people who wanted to drink were forced to do it outside, or in the parking lot of 7-Eleven - Ellie Hayes was woken up by two masked figures. They hauled her to her feet and

handcuffed her wrists in front of her body as if she were a convict. Her parents were gone for the weekend-the players knew what they were doing.

Her older brother, Roger, heard the noise and the scuffling and burst into the hall, holding a baseball bat. But Ellie managed to cry out to him.

‘It’s Terror!’ she said. Roger lowered the baseball bat, shook his head, returned to his room. He, too, had played.

Ellie’s biggest fear, other than floods, was an enclosure, and she was relieved when instead of being packed in the trunk, she was guided into the backseat of a car she didn’t recognize.

They drove for what seemed like

forever-long enough that she began to get bored and fell asleep. Then the car stopped, and she saw a vast, empty parking lot, and a fence enclosed by barbed wire. Before the headlights cut, she saw a weathered sign tacked to a sad, saggy-looking building.

WELCOME TO THE DENNY SWIMMING POOL.

HOURS 9 A.M.–DUSK, MEMORIAL DAY TO LABOR DAY.

The padlock on the gates had been left undone. Ellie remembered, as they passed through it, that Ray Hanrahan had done maintenance at the Swimming Pool last summer.

Could he be in on this? Across the

wet grass, the squelching mud, to the edge of the pool, which sat glimmering slickly in the moonlight, faintly lit up from below, electric, and improbable. The fear came rushing back all at once. ‘You have to be kidding me.’

She was at the edge of the deep end, trying to backpedal. But she couldn’t move. They had her tightly. Something metal bit into the palm of her hands, and she curled her fingers instinctively around it, too frightened to think or wonder what it was. ‘How do you expect me to-?’

She didn’t get to finish before she was pushed headfirst into the water. Flood. A flood of water everywhere: mouth, eyes, nose. She was underwater for a little more than a minute before she

was hauled to the surface, but she would afterward swear it was at least five, or seven.

Endless seconds of her heartbeat thudding in her ears, her lungs screaming for air, her legs kicking for purchase. So many seconds of Fear-so complete, so all-consuming, it wasn't until she was once again in the open air, taking deep, grateful breaths, she realized that all along she had been clutching tightly to the small metal key that fitted her handcuffs.

Marcel's gamble, at last, paid off. In the morning, the story of Ellie spread, and by noon the betting slips had once again appeared. This time, they were passed from hand to hand, secretively,

cautiously. Even Seller and Ellie Hayes had both failed their challenges. They were out of the game.

Colin Atkinson, too. He'd been the first to flee the Graybill house-rumor that he hadn't stopped running until he was to Massachusetts. Marcel, Ray, Maggie, and Nathaniel were still in. So-where Harold Lee, Kim

Hollister, and Derek Klieg.

Only seven players left.

WEDNESDAY,

JULY 27

Marcel,

THERE WAS NO JOY LEFT IN THE GAME-NO LIGHTNESS or humor at

all. Terror, as far as Marcel knew, had never been this serious. It had never been played with so much secretiveness, either. This was about more than getting in trouble for continuing a game. The police officers were still trying to pin the fire at the Graybill house, and Little Bill's death, on someone. Even the judges had lost their sense of humor. The next email that arrived, several days after Ellie had been eliminated from the game, was bleak to the point.

Malden Plaza, 1-85. 9:00 p.m.

Wednesday.

Joh- John drove. It felt almost routine: Maggie sat shotgun, Nathaniel and Marcel were in the back. Nathaniel spent the whole drive tapping the window

with a knuckle, unconsciously beating out her private rhythm. Marcel could almost believe they were just heading on a late-night adventure to the mall. Except that Maggie looked exhausted and kept yawning, and Joh- John hardly said a word except to ask her, in a deep voice, what was wrong.

'What do you think is wrong?' Maggie replied. Marcel didn't want to eavesdrop, but he couldn't help it. 'Your mom called,' Joh- John said after a pause. 'She said you haven't been home.'

'I'm just staying at Anne's for a few days. I'm fine.'

'She said you took the car.'

'So now you're on her side?'

Joh- John must have gone to Little Bill's funeral. Marcel recognized the folded memorial pamphlet, featuring a winged angel, now hanging on a ribbon from his rearview mirror. Like a charm, or a talisman. It weird that he'd felt the need to hang it. Joh- John didn't strike

Marcel is superstitious. Then again, Marcel didn't get Joh- John. He didn't, for example, understand why he felt he was part of the game, why he felt guilty for Bill Kelly's death.

When they passed the Columbia County water towers, Marcel looked out and remembered the night of the first raid, when he, Nathaniel, and Maggie had hidden from the police officers. He felt a sudden wrench of grief, for the way time,

always goes forward, relentlessly. It was like floodwater: it left only clutter in its wake. The sky was choked with masses of dark clouds, but it had stopped raining at last.

Impossible to tell where the sun was coming from.

A thick beam of light, singular and strange when the rest of the sky was still so dark, cut across the road. But the drive to Malden Plaza was long; they had to loop around to get to the northbound side- and before they'd arrived, the sun had set.

There were a few dozen cars in the lot, most of them hugging up as close to the McDonald's as possible, plus a couple of eighteen-wheelers, trucks that

must have been on a run from Albany to Canada. From the opposite side of the lot, Marcel watched a family emerging from the big swinging doors, carrying paper bags of fast food and large soda cups. He wondered where they were off to. Somewhere better than here.

The players had parked as far from the building as possible, at the edge of the lot, where the trees were creeping close to the pavement and it was much darker. Seven players left and only two dozen spectators. Marcel was surprised that -Digging had bothered to show up. Standing under the tall, stiff-necked street lamps, he looked green, as if he was in danger of vomiting.

‘Rules are simple.’ -Digging

practically had to shout over the roar of traffic behind him. I-87, separated from the parking lot by only a flimsy, shin-high divider, was a six-lane mega highway.

‘Each of you has to cross. The five who cross the fastest move on. The other two don’t.’

‘I’ll go first.’ Ray stepped forward. He had avoided even glancing at Marcel. There was something like a truce between them, at least temporarily. It was fun. Ray was the guy- Marcel hated most in the world, besides Luke. And yet Ray was the guy who knew more of Marcel’s secrets than anyone. ‘I want to get this over with.’

‘Wait.’ -Digging extracted a strip of black fabric from his pocket and shook

it out. He truly looked miserable. ‘You have to wear this.’

‘What is that?’ Ray asked, even though it was a blindfold.

Nathaniel and Maggie exchanged a look.

~*~

Marcel knew what they were thinking without having to ask. There was always a twist. The game was never easy. -Digging hesitated. For a second, it looked as though he was going to attempt to tie the blindfold on Ray himself.

Ray scowled at him. ‘Give me that,’ he said and snatched the blindfold from -Digging. -Digging backed off quickly, obviously relieved. Ray put the

fabric over his eyes and knotted it behind his head.

‘Happy now?’ he said, to no one in particular.

Marcel stepped forward, so he was standing directly in front of Ray. He threw a punch, stopping a few inches short of Ray’s nose. Nathaniel gasped and -Digging shouted. But Ray didn’t even flinch.

‘It’s all right,’ Marcel said. ‘He can’t see sh*t.’

‘Don’t trust me, Mason?’ Ray’s mouth curled into a smile.

‘Not even a little,’ Marcel said. -Digging had to help guide Ray to the divider that separated the parking lot

from the narrow patch of grass and gravel that ran along the highway. Trucks were thundering past, spitting exhaust, and roaring heat. A car blew its horn as Ray fumbled over the divider, and Marcel imagined a sudden swerve, the headlights swollen, freezing Ray in place, the shudder of the impact.

But that would come later.

‘Time,’ -Digging shouted. He had his phone out. For the first time, he noticed that Joh- John was standing some ways apart, his lips moving as though in silent prayer. His face was incredible: anguished, twisted. And at that moment, Marcel had a suspicion. More like an intuition. But he dismissed the thought quickly. Impossible.

‘Ten seconds down,’ -Digging announced. Marcel turned his eyes back to the highway. Ray was still hesitating, swaying like a drunk, like he was hoping momentum would unglue his feet. A truck blasted a horn, and he jerked backward. The sound rolled and echoed through the night air, distorted by the distance to an alien cry. The motion was noise: Marcel closed his eyes and heard the fizz of the tires on the road, the thud of bass and music, engines grinding and spitting, the rush of air when a car blew by. He opened his eyes again.

‘Twenty seconds!’ -Digging’s voice had gone shrill. There was a sudden break in the traffic. Four, five seconds in all six lanes, the road was clear. Ray

sensed it and ran. He barreled straight into the divider on the other side of the road and face-planted. But it didn't matter.

He'd done it. He whipped off the blindfold and waved it above his head, victorious. The whole thing had taken him twenty-seven seconds. He had to wait for another brick in the traffic to cross, but this time he did so at a jog. He was showing off.

~*~

'Who's next?' -Digging said.

'Let's get this over with before-' Another truck blasted by, whipping away the rest of his words.

'I'll go.' Marcel stepped forward.

Ray dangled the blindfold from one hand. For a second, their eyes met. They were joined now, more than ever.

‘Don’t choke,’ Ray said in a deep voice. Marcel snatched the blindfold from him.

‘Don’t worry about me,’ he said. The cloth was thick and opaque, like something you’d fashion a tarp out of. Once- Marcel put it over his eyes, he was completely blind, and for a moment he felt a tightness in his chest, the overwhelming sense of disorientation and dizziness, like when you wake up from a nightmare in an unfamiliar place.

He focused on the sounds: trucks, music, the fizz of the tires, and gradually he could map out space in his mind.

Funny how just being without sight could leave him feeling so exposed, raw. Anyone could rush at him and he'd never know. He felt two soft hands slip around his wrist.

'Be careful,' Nathaniel whispered. He didn't answer, just fumbled to touch her face, hoping he wouldn't accidentally get her boob instead. Hoping he would, too.

'All right,' he announced in what he hoped was -Digging's direction. 'I'm ready.'

As he had done with Ray, -Digging took his arm and guided him to the low metal divider and instructed him to climb it. Then- Marcel was standing blind on the side of the road, while cars

and semis roared past him. The wind blew hot and stinking with exhaust, and the ground trembled from the motion of the crushing wheels. Horns screamed out and faded.

Marcel's heart was going hard and his mouth was dry. He hadn't expected to be so afraid. His ears were full of a pounding rhythm-he couldn't tell if it was noise from the highway or the echo of his heart. He barely heard - Digging call time.

Sh*t!

He couldn't hear-like how- is- he going to know when to cross? What if he tripped? His legs felt liquid and unstable- if he tried to walk, they would collapse, get tangled up. He pictured Nathaniel's

hands, the way she'd tilted her face to his when he kissed her.

He imagined Dayna's stalk legs, imagined her chair pushed next to the window, the sun flooding the room, her legs growing, thickening, sprouting again into strong, muscled calves.

The pounding in his ears receded. He could breathe again. And suddenly he realized it was quiet. No fizz of tires, no honking, no roar of an engine bearing down on him. A break.

He ran...

Pavement, and then a narrow strip of grass, which marked the space that divided the different sides of the highway. He should have stopped and

listened again, just to be sure, but he couldn't-if he stopped, he'd never go again. He had to keep moving. The wind was rushing in his ears and his blood was on fire. Suddenly he felt a searing pain in his shins, and he jerked forward.

He'd reached the divider on the other side.

He'd passed. He ripped off the blindfold and turned around. He thought Nathaniel and Maggie were cheering, but he wasn't sure two cars went by him, a twin blur, and although he could tell they were shouting, he couldn't hear what they said.

Underneath the streetlamp, they looked like actors on a stage, or tiny figurines, set up for display, and the cars,

shining as they passed through the light, like toy models of the real thing.

He still felt dizzy. He waited for another brick in the traffic, then crossed back at a slow jog. He wanted to move faster, but his legs resisted.

He could barely lift them to climb over the divider. -Digging patted him on the shoulder and Maggie grabbed his arm. He was glad. Otherwise, he might have collapsed.

‘Nineteen seconds!’ -Digging said.

And Maggie kept saying,

‘Awesome. Awesome.’

Maggie volunteered to go next.

Something had happened to her in the past few days-something had changed.

She'd always been pretty, Marcel thought -sturdy-looking and dependable, like someone in an advertisement about deodorant. A little awkward, too- always holding herself carefully, like she was worried if she didn't pay attention, she'd knock someone or something over.

He hadn't gone to prom, but he'd seen pictures on Facebook, and Maggie had stood out; slouching a little so she wouldn't be too much taller than Matt, wearing some ruffled pink thing that didn't suit her at all, and trying to smile through her discomfort. But there was nothing awkward about her now. She was serious, straight-backed, focused. She

barely hesitated at the edge of the road. As soon as there was a break, she ran. Nathaniel gasped.

‘There’s a car-,’ she said. Her fingers tightened on Marcel’s arm.

There was car-northbound traffic, speeding toward her. It must have caught her in its headlights just as she crossed into the lane, because the driver sounded his horn, three quick blasts.

‘Jesus.’ Joh- John was frozen, white-faced.’

Maggie!’ Nathaniel screamed. But Maggie kept moving, and she reached safety just as the car blew over the spot where she’d been standing only a few seconds earlier. The driver gave four

more furious blasts on the horn. Maggie whipped off the blindfold and stood, chest heaving, at the side of the road. For a while, she was lost to view in a surge of sudden traffic: two trucks passing simultaneously from opposite directions, a stream of cars.

When Maggie crossed back, - Digging through an arm around her shoulders.

‘Seventeen seconds!’ he crowed.

‘Fastest one yet. You’re safe.’

‘Thanks,’ she said. She was out of breath. As she passed under the streetlamp, she looked truly beautiful: hair long and tangled down her back, high cheekbones, and glittering eyes.

‘Good job,’ Marcel said.

Maggie nodded at him.

‘Heath bar! I was so scared for you!

That car.’ Nathaniel threw her arms around

Maggie’s neck. She had to stand on her tiptoes.

‘It’s not that bad, Nathaniel,’ Maggie said. For a second, she kept her eyes on Marcel. Something passed between them.

He thought it was a warning. Kim Hollister went next, and she was unlucky. As soon as she took her place blindfolded at the side of the road, there was a blast

of traffic from both directions. But even after it cleared, she stayed where she was, hesitating, obviously afraid.

‘Go!’ -Digging shouted. ‘You’re fine! Go.’

‘No fair,’ Ray said. ‘No fair.

That’s freaking cheating.’ They started to argue, but it didn’t matter anyway; Kim still hadn’t moved.

Finally, she screeched, ‘Be quiet!

Please. I can’t hear anything. Please.’ It took a few more seconds before she shuffled onto the road, and almost immediately she backed up again.

‘Did you hear that?’ Her voice was shrill in the quiet. ‘Is that a car?’

By the time she made it across, fifty-two seconds had elapsed. The longest time by almost double.

It was Natalie's turn next. Suddenly she turned to him, eyes shining. He realized she was on the verge of tears.

'Do you think he's watching?' Nathaniel whispered. Marcel thought she must be talking about God.

'Who?' He said.

'Bill Kelly…' A spasm passed over her face.

'There's no one watching us,' Marcel said. 'No one but the judges, anyway.'

His eyes met Joh- John's across

the lot. And again, just for a minute, he wondered.

FRIDAY, JULY 29

Marcel,

Marcel HAD BEEN HOPING NATHANIEL'S BIRTHDAY PARTY would be small, and he was disappointed when he pulled his bike up to Joh- John's house and saw a dozen cars fitted together like Tetris pieces in the only part of the yard not dominated by junk. There was music playing from somewhere, and lanterns had been placed all around the yard, perched on various objects like metallic fireflies settling down to rest.

'You came!' Nathaniel weaved toward him, holding a paper cup. Beer

sloshed on his shoe, and he realized she was already drunk. She was wearing lots of makeup and a tiny dress, and she looked frighteningly beautiful, like someone much older. Her eyes were bright like she was on something. He was aware that she had just been talking to a group of guys he didn't know; they, too, looked older and were now staring at him and felt suddenly uncomfortable. She saw him looking and waved a hand. 'Don't worry about them,' she said. Her words were slurring together.

'Some guys I know from a bar in Kingston. I only invited them because they brought alcohol. I'm so glad you're here.'

Marcel had Nathaniel's present

wrapped in tissue paper in his pocket. He wanted to give it to her but not here, while people were watching. He wanted to tell her, too, that he was sorry about Terror.

Nathaniel had frozen up at the side of the highway and taken more than a minute to cross. Just like that, the game was over for her.

Everyone else would move on to the next challenge. On the way home from the highway challenge, Nathaniel had barely said a word, just sat stiffly next to him with tears running down her face. No one had spoken. Marcel had been annoyed at Joh- John, and Maggie.

They were her best friends. They were supposed to know what to say to

make her feel better. He had felt helpless, as frightened as he had while standing on that highway with the blindfold. But Nathaniel was already hauling him off toward the back of the house. ‘Come get a drink, okay? And say hi to everyone.’

At the back of the house, a large grill was letting off thick clouds of smoke that smelled like meat and charcoal. An old man was pushing around some burgers on it, holding a beer in one hand. Marcel thought it might have been Joh- John’s dad-they had the same nose, the same floppy hair, although the men were gray-and was surprised. In school, he’d always thought of Joh- John as kind of a dork, well-meaning but just too nice to be interesting. He’d imagined Joh- John’s

family would be of the mom-dad-sister older- brother-picket-fence variety.

Not some guy with a beer grilling in the middle of towers of rusting junk. But that was another thing you learned when playing Fear: people would surprise you.

They would knock you on your ass. It was the only thing you could count on. Kids from the school were standing around in little groups or using some of the old furniture and gutted car frames as makeshift chairs. They were all staring at Marcel, some with curiosity and some with open hostility, and it was not until then that he realized none of the other Fear players had been invited, except for Maggie. That’s when it hit him that there

weren’t many Fear players left.

Just five…

And he was one of them.

The two things-Nathaniel’s hand, and the fact that he was getting so close-sent a thrill up his spine.

‘The keg’s over there, behind the old motorcycle.’ Nathaniel giggled. She gestured with her cup, sending another bit of beer sloshing over the rim, and he remembered suddenly the time she’d called him Dave at homecoming last year. His stomach tightened. He hated parties, never felt comfortable with them.

‘I’ll be back, okay? I must circulate.

It’s kinda my party, after all.’ She kissed him on the cheek, he noticed, and of course then again on the other cheek- and quickly disappeared, blending into a knot of people standing around the keg. Without Nathaniel next to him, he felt like he was back in the halls at school, except this time, instead of everyone ignoring him, everyone was staring. When he spotted Maggie, he could have run up and kissed her.

She saw him at the same time and waved him over. She was sitting on the hood of what Marcel could only imagine was one of Joh- John’s projects: A Pinto junk-er, wheel-less and propped up on cinder blocks. He could count a half-dozen cars, in various states of

construction and deconstruction, just from where he was standing.

‘Hey…’ Maggie was drinking a Coke. She looked tired. ‘I didn’t know you would be here.’

Marcel shrugged. He wasn’t sure what that meant. Nathaniel had only invited him at the last minute. ‘Didn’t want to miss the big birthday,’ was all he said.

‘Nathaniel’s trashed already,’ Maggie said with a short laugh. She looked away, squinting.

Again, he was struck by the change that had come over her this summer. She was thinning out, sharpening, and her beauty was becoming

more pronounced. Like she'd been wearing an invisibility cloak her whole life, and now it was coming off. Marcel leaned against the hood and fumbled in his pocket for his cigarettes.

He didn't even feel like smoking- he just wanted something to do with his hands. 'How's Lily?' he asked. She looked at him sharply. 'She's fine,' she said slowly. Then: 'She's inside, watching TV.' Marcel nodded. The day before he'd been smoking a cigarette in Meth Row when he'd heard someone singing behind the shed where he usually kept his bike. Curious, he circled to the back.

And there was Maggie.

Butt-naked.

She'd shouted, and he'd turned quickly away, but not before he noticed she was washing with the hose from Dot's Diner, the one the kitchen boys used to spray down the alley in the evenings. He saw a car, her car, with clothes drying on its hood; and a girl who must have been Maggie's sister, sitting in the grass, reading.

'Don't tell,' Maggie had said.

Marcel had kept his back to her. One of the pairs of underwear had blown off the hood and onto the ground; he kept his eyes fixed on it. It was full-butt underwear, patterned with strawberries, faded. Next, to it, he'd seen two toothbrushes and a curled-up tube of toothpaste sitting on an overturned

bucket, and several pairs of shoes lined up neatly in the dirt. He wondered how long they'd been camping out there.

'I won't,' he had said without turning around.

And he wouldn't. That was another thing Marcel liked about secrets: they bonded people together. 'How long you think you can keep it up?' he asked now.

'As long as it takes to win,' she replied.

He looked at her face so serious, so dead set-and felt a sudden surge of something like joy. Understanding. That's what it was; he and Maggie understood each other.

‘I like you, Maggie,’ he said.

‘You’re all right.’ She briefly scanned his face, as if to verify that he wasn’t laughing at her.

Then she smiled. ‘Right back at you, Marcel.’

~*~

Nathaniel reappeared, carrying a bottle of tequila. ‘Take a shot with me, Maggie.’ Maggie made a face. ‘Tequila?’

‘Come on,’ Nathaniel said, pouting. Her words were more blurred than ever, but her eyes kept their strange, unnatural brightness- like something not human. ‘It’s my birthday.’ Maggie shook her head. Nathaniel laughed.

‘I don’t believe it.’ Her voice was getting louder. ‘You’ll play Fear, but you’re afraid of taking a shot.’

‘Sh-h-h-h.’ Maggie’s face turned red. ‘She wasn’t even supposed to play,’ Nathaniel said, pointing the bottle at Maggie, as though addressing an audience. And people were listening. Marcel saw that they were turning in Maggie’s direction, smirking, whispering.

‘Come on, Nathaniel. You’re not supposed to talk about the game, remember?’ he said, but Nathaniel ignored him.

-Then-

‘I was going to play,’ Nathaniel announced. ‘I did play. Not anymore. She-

you- sabotaged me. You sabotaged me.' She turned to Maggie.

Maggie stared at her for a second.

'You're drunk,' she said matter-of-factly, then slid off the hood of the car.

Nathaniel tried to grab her. 'I was just kidding,' she said. But Maggie kept walking. 'Come on, Heath. I was just freaking around.'

'I'm going to find Joh- John,' Maggie said without turning. Nathaniel leaned up against the car, next to Marcel. She uncapped the bottle of tequila, took a sip, and made a face.

'Some birthday,' she grumbled. Marcel could scent her skin, the alcohol

on her breathing, and strawberry shampoo in her hair. He was aching to touch her. Alternatively, he shoved his hands into his pocket and felt for the present. He knew he had to give it to her now before he chickened out or she got even more wasted.

'Look, Nathaniel. Is there somewhere we could go? I mean, to be alone for a minute?' Realizing she might think he was going to try to feel her up or something, he rushed on: 'I have something for you.' And he showed her the little tissue-paper-wrapped box, hoping she wouldn't care that it had gotten squashed in his pocket. Her face changed. She smiled hugely, showing off her perfect little white teeth, and set the

bottle of tequila down.

‘Marcel, you didn’t have to,’ she said.

And then: ‘Come on, I know somewhere we can go.’ Just beyond the back porch was an area dedicated to what looked like lawn decorations: towering limestone statues of various mythical figures- Marcel should probably know but didn’t; limestone benches and birdbaths full of standing water, moss, and leaves. Because of the statues and the porch, it was concealed from view, and as he entered the semicircular enclosure, Marcel’s stomach started going crazy. The music was muffled, and he and Nathaniel were alone.

‘Go ahead,’ he said, passing her

the box. ‘Open it.’ He thought he might vomit. What if she hated it? Finally, she got the wrapping off, and she opened the little box and stood there staring at it: a dark cord of velvet and a small, crystal butterfly charm, light dazzling from its wings, resting neatly on a bunch of pieces of cotton.

She stared at it for so long, he thought she must hate it, and then he thought he really would be sick. The necklace had cost him three full days of the cash he got on stocking shelves.

‘If you want to return it,’ he started to say. But then she looked up and he saw that she was crying.

‘It’s beautiful,’ she said. ‘I love it.’ And before he knew what was happening,

she reached for him and drew him down to her and kissed him.

Her lips tasted like salt and tequila.

When she pulled back, he felt dizzy.

He’d kissed girls before but not like that. Usually, he was too stressed about what their tongue was doing or whether he was using too much pressure or too little. But with Nathaniel, he forgot to think, or even breathe, and now his vision was clouded with black spots. ‘Listen,’ he blurted out. ‘I want you to know I’ll still honor the split. If I win, I mean. You can still take your share of the money.’ She stiffened suddenly as if he’d slapped her. For a second, she stood

there, rigid. Then she shoved the jewelry box back at him. ‘I can’t take this,’ she said. ‘I can’t accept it.’

Marcel felt like he’d just inhaled a bowling ball. ‘What do you mean?’ ‘I mean I don’t want it,’ she said and forced the box into his hand. ‘We’re not together, okay? I mean, I like you and all but - I’m seeing someone else. It isn’t right.’ Cold, cold: washing his whole body.

He was freezing, confused, and furious. He didn’t feel like himself, didn’t sound like himself either, as he heard himself say, ‘Who is it?’ She had turned away from him. ‘It doesn’t matter,’ she said. ‘No one you know.’

‘You kissed me,’ he said. ‘You kissed me, you made me think-’ She shook

her head. She still wouldn't look at him. 'It was for the game. Okay? I wanted you to help me win. That's all.' That voice he didn't recognize came out of his mouth again. 'I don't believe you.' The words sounded thin and flimsy.

She kept speaking as if he wasn't there. 'But I don't need Fear. I don't need you. I don't need Maggie.

Kevin says I've got potential in front of the camera. He says-' 'Kevin?' Something clicked in Marcel's brain, and his stomach opened. 'That scumbag you met at the mall?'

'He's not a scumbag.' Now she whirled around to face him. She was shaking. Her fists were balled, and her eyes were bright and there was wetness

on her cheeks, and it broke his heart. He still wanted to kiss her. He hated her…!

‘He’s legit. He believes in me. He said he would help me….’ The cold in Marcel’s chest had turned into a hard fist. He could feel it beating against his ribs, threatening to explode out through his skin. ‘I’m sure he did,’ he said, practically spitting.

‘Let me guess. All you had to do was show him your tits-’ ‘Shut up,’ she whispered.

‘Maybe let him feel you up for a while. Or did you have to spread your legs, too?’ As soon as he said it, he wished the words back into his mouth. Nathaniel stiffened as though a shock had run through her. And he could tell from her

face-the guilt and the sadness and the sorrow that she did, she had.

‘Nathaniel.’ He could barely say her name. He wanted to say he was sorry, and he was sorry for her too, for what she’d done. He wanted to tell her that he believed in her and thought she was beautiful.

‘Go away,’ she whispered.

‘Please.’ He started to reach for her.

She stumbled backward, nearly tripping on the grass. ‘Go,’ she said.

Her eyes locked on his for a minute. He saw two dark holes, like wounds; then she whirled around and was gone. Maggie JOH- JOHN HAD A

TRAMPOLINE; OR AT LEAST, HE HAD A trampoline frame. The nylon had long ago disintegrated and been replaced with a heavy canvas tarp, stretched tautly.

Maggie wasn't surprised to find him there, hiding out from the rest of the guests. He'd never been super social.

She wasn't either. It was one of the things that bonded them.

'Having an appropriate time?' she asked as she maneuvered onto the canvas next to him. Joh- John smelled like cinnamon and a little like butter.

He shrugged. When he smiled, his nose crinkled. 'So-so. You?' 'So-so,' she admitted. 'How's Lily doing?' Maggie had had no choice but to bring her. They'd

installed her in the den, and Joh- John had volunteered to check in on her when he went inside for more plastic cups.

'She's fine… Watching a marathon of some celebrity show. I made her popcorn.' He leaned back, so he was staring at the sky, and motioned for Maggie to do the same. When they were little, they had sometimes slept out here, side by side in sleeping bags, surrounded by empty packages of chips and cookies.

One time, she had woken up and found a raccoon sitting on her chest. Joh-John had yelled to startle it away-but not before getting a picture. It was one of her favorite memories from childhood.

She could still remember what it felt like to wake up next to him, with dew

covering their sleeping bags and soaking the canvas, their breath steaming in the air-they were so warm next to each other. Like they were in the only safe, good place in the world.

Now she unconsciously moved her head onto the hollow space between his chest and shoulder, and he wrapped one arm around her. His fingers grazed her bare arms, and her body felt suddenly fizzy and warm. She wondered how they must look from above: like two pieces of a puzzle fit neatly together.

‘Are you going to miss me?’ Joh-John asked suddenly.

Maggie’s heart gave a huge, awful thump like it wanted to leap out of her throat. She’d been trying all summer

to ignore the fact that Joh- John was going away to college. Now they had less than a month left. ‘Don’t be an idiot,’ she said, nudging him.

‘I’m serious.’ He shifted, withdrawing his arm from under her head, rolling over onto one elbow to face her. Casually, he slung his other arm over her waist. Her shirt was riding up and his hand was on her stomach- his tan skin against her pale, freckled belly-and her lungs were having trouble working properly.

It’s Joh- John, she reminded herself.

It’s just Joh- John. ‘I’m going to miss you so bad, Maggie,’ he said. They were so close; she could see a bit of fuzz

clinging to one of his eyelashes; she could see individual spirals of color in his eyes. And his lips. Soft-looking. The perfect imperfectness of his teeth.

'What about Avery?' Maggie blurted. She didn't know where the words came from. 'Are you going to miss her, too?'

He drew back an inch, frowning. Then he sighed and shoved a hand through his hair. As soon as he wasn't touching Maggie anymore, she would have given anything to have his touch-back. 'I'm not with Avery anymore,' he said carefully. 'We broke up.'

Maggie started. 'Since when?' 'Does it matter?' Joh- John looked annoyed. 'Look, it was never a real thing,

okay?' 'You just liked hooking up with her,' Maggie said. She suddenly felt angry, and cold, and exposed. She sat up, tugging down her shirt. Joh- John was leaving her behind. He would find new girls-pretty, tiny girls like Avery-and he would forget all about her. It happened all the time.

'Hey.' Joh- John sat up too. Maggie wouldn't look at him, so he reached out and forced her chin in his direction. 'I'm trying to talk to you, okay? I - I had to break up with Avery. I like - someone else. There's someone else. That's what I'm trying to tell you. But it's complicated….'

He was staring at her so intensely; Maggie could feel the warmth

between them.

She didn’t think. She just leaned in and closed her eyes and kissed him. It was like taking a bite of ice cream that’s been sitting out just long enough: sweet, easy, perfect. She wasn’t worried about whether she was doing it right, as she had been all those years ago, in the movie theater, when she could only think of the popcorn in her teeth.

She was simply there, inhaling the smell of him, of his lips, while the music thudded softly in the background and the cicadas swelled an accompaniment.

Maggie felt little bursts of happiness in her chest, as though someone had set off sparklers there.

Then, abruptly, he pulled away.

'Wait,' he said. 'Wait.' And instantly, the sparklers in her chest were extinguished, leaving only a smoking black place. Just that one word and she knew: she'd made a mistake.

'I can't-' Suddenly he looked different-older, full of regret, like someone she barely knew. 'I don't want to lie to you, Maggie.'

She felt like she'd swallowed something spoiled: there was a bad taste in her mouth, and her stomach was lashing. She felt her face begin to burn. It wasn't her. He was in love with someone else. And she'd just shoved her tongue down his throat like a lunatic. She had to crab-walk backward, away from him, to

the edge of the trampoline.

'Stupid,' she said. 'It was stupid. Just forget it, okay? I don't know what I was thinking.' For a second, he looked hurt. But she was too embarrassed to care. And then he frowned, and he just looked tired and a little irritated, like she was an unruly child and he was a patient father. She realized suddenly that that was how Joh- John saw her: as a kid. A kid sister.

'Will you just sit down?' he said in his tired-dad voice. His hair was sticking straight up-the hair equivalent of a scream.

'It's getting late,' Maggie said, which it wasn't. 'I have to take Lily home. Mom will get worried.' Lie on top of a lie.

She didn’t know why she said it. Maybe because at that moment she wished for it wish that she was heading back to a real home with a normal mom who cared, instead of back to the car and the parking spot on Meth Row. She wished that she was small and delicate, like a special Christmas ornament that needed to be handled correctly. I wished that she was someone else.

‘Maggie, please,’ he said. The world was breaking up, shattering into colors-and she knew if she didn’t get out of there, she would start to cry. ‘Forget about it,’ she said. ‘Seriously. Would you? Just forget it ever happened.’ She only made it a few steps away before the tears started. She swiped them away quickly

with the heel of a hand; she had to pass through a dozen old classmates to get to the house, including Matt’s best friend, and she would rather die than be the girl crying at her best friend’s birthday party.

Everyone would think she was wasted. Funny how people could be around you for so many years and be so off the mark. She went in through the back door, taking a second inside to stand, inhaling, trying to get control of herself. Weirdly, although Joh- John’s whole property was a junkyard, the house was clean, sparsely furnished, and always smelled like carpet cleaner. Maggie knew that Mr. Mark's longtime girlfriend, Carol, considered the yard a lost cause. But the home was her place, and she was always

scrubbing and straightening, and yelling at Joh- John to take his dirty feet off the coffee table, for God's sake.

Even though the house hadn't been remodeled since the seventies, and still sported shag carpet and weird orange-and-white- checkered linoleum in the kitchen, it looked spotless.

Maggie's throat tightened again.

Everything was so familiar here: the Formica dining room table; the crack running along with the kitchen countertop; the curled photographs stuck to the fridge with magnets advertising dentists' offices and hardware stores. They were as familiar to her as any she had ever called her own. They were hers, and Joh- John had been hers, once.

But no more.

She could hear running water and muffled TV sounds from the den, where Lily was watching. She stepped into the darkened hall and noticed the bathroom door was partly open. A wedge of light lay thickly on the carpet. Now she could hear crying, over the sound of the water. She saw a curtain of dark hair appear and disappear quickly.

‘Nathaniel?’ Maggie swung the door open carefully. Water gushed from the faucet, and steam was drumming up from the porcelain bowl. The water must have been scalding, but Nathaniel was still scrubbing her hands and sniffling. Her skin was raw and red and shiny like it had been burned.

‘Hey.’ Maggie forgot, for the moment, about her problems. She took a step into the bathroom. Instinctively, she reached out and shut off the faucet. Even the taps were hot.

‘Hey- are you okay?’

It was a stupid thing to say. Nathaniel was not okay. She turned to Maggie. Her eyes were puffy, and her whole face looked weird and swollen, like bread that was rising wrong. ‘It’s not working anymore,’ she said in a whisper.

‘What isn’t?’ Maggie asked. She suddenly felt hyper-alert. She noticed the drip-drip-drip of the faucet, and Nathaniel’s monstrously red hands, hanging like deflated balloons by her side. She thought of the way that Nathaniel

always liked things even, straight down the middle.

How sometimes she showered more than once a day. The taps and tongue clicks.

The stuff she'd mostly ignored because she was so used to it. Another blind spot between people.

'That's why I froze on the highway, you know,' Nathaniel went on. 'I just - glitched.' Her eyes were watery again. 'Nothing's working.' Her voice wavered. 'I don't feel safe, you know?'

'Come here,' Maggie said. She drew Nathaniel into a hug and Nathaniel continued crying, drunk, against her chest. She gripped Maggie tightly as if

she worried she might fall. ‘Sh-hh,’ Maggie murmured, repeatedly. ‘Sh-hh. It’s your birthday.’

But she didn’t say it would be okay. How could she? She knew that Nathaniel was right.

None of them was safe.

No more. Never again.

Marcel-

Marcel HEARD VOICES IN THE LIVING ROOM AS SOON as he opened the door and immediately regretted coming home directly. It was just after eleven, and his first thought was that Ricky was over again.

He wasn’t in the mood to deal

with Ricky grinning like an idiot and Dayna blushing and trying to make things not awkward and all the time shooting Marcel dagger eyes like he was the one intruding. But then his mom called, ‘Come in here, Marcel!’ A man was sitting on the couch. His hair was graying, and he was wearing a rumpled suit, which matched his rumpled face.

‘What?’ Marcel said, barely looking at his mom. He didn’t even try to be polite. He wasn’t going to play nice with one of his mom’s dates.

His mom frowned.

‘Marcel,’ she said, drawing out his name, like a warning bell. ‘You know Bill Kelly, don’t you? Bill came over for a little bit of company.’ She was watching

Marcel closely, and he read a dozen messages in her eyes at once: Bill Kelly just lost his son, so if you're rude to him, I swear you'll be sleeping on the streets...

Marcel felt suddenly like his whole body was made of angles and spikes, and he couldn't remember how to move it correctly. He turned jerkily to the man on the couch: Big Bill Kelly. Now he could see the resemblance to his son. The straw-colored hair running, in the father's case, to gray; the piercing blue eyes and the heavy jaw.

'Hi,' Marcel said. His voice was a croak. He cleared his throat. 'I was -am- I mean, we're all sorry to hear-'

'Thank you, son.' Mr. Kelly's voice was surprisingly clear. Marcel was glad

he'd been interrupted because he didn't know what else he would have said. He was so hot he felt like his face was about to explode. He had a sudden, hysterical impulse to shout out: I was there. I was there when your son died. I could have saved him.

He took a deep breath. The game was wearing on him. He was starting to crack. After what seemed like forever, Mr. Kelly's eyes passed away from Marcel, back to his mother. 'I should go, Sheila.' He stood up slowly. He was so tall he nearly grazed the ceiling with his head. 'I'm going to Albany tomorrow. Autopsies were done. I don't expect any surprises, but -' He made a helpless gesture with his hands. 'I want to know everything. I will

know everything.'

Sweat was picking up underneath Marcel's collar. It might have been his imagination, but he was sure Mr. Kelly's words were directed at him. He thought of all the Fear betting slips he'd been collecting this summer. Where were they? Had he put them in his underwear drawer? Or left them out on his bedside table? Jesus. He had to get rid of them.

'Of course.'

Marcel's mom stood too. Now all three of them were standing, awkwardly, like they were in a play and had forgotten their lines. 'Say goodnight to Mr. Kelly, Marcel.'

Marcel coughed. 'Yeah. Sure.

Look,

I’m sorry again-’

Mr. Kelly stuck out his hand.

‘God’s works,’ he said quietly. But Marcel felt that when Mr. Kelly shook his hand, he squeezed just a little too hard.

That was the night -Digging went to a party down at the gully and ended up with a cracked rib, two black eyes, and one of his teeth knocked out. Derek Klieg was drunk; that was the excuse he gave afterward, but everyone knew it was deeper than that, and once the swelling in -Digging face went down, he told anyone who would listen how Derek had jumped him, threatened him, tried to get him to cough up the names and identities of the

judges, and wouldn’t listen when -Digging insisted he didn’t know. It was an obvious violation of one of Fear’s many unspoken rules. The announcer was off-limits. So were the judges.

Derek Klieg was immediately disqualified. He had forfeited his spot in the game, and his name was struck from the betting slips by morning. And Natalie, the last player eliminated, was back on.

SATURDAY,

JULY 30

Maggie,

MAGGIE WAS WOKEN BY SOMEONE RAPPING ON THE window. She sat up, rubbing her eyes, startled and momentarily disoriented. Sun was

streaming through the windows of the Taurus.

Marcel was watching her through the windshield. Now that she was awake, everything came into sudden focus: the kiss with Joh- John and its botched end; Natalie crying in the bathroom; and now Marcel watching her, taking in the rumpled sheet and beaten-up cups from Dairy Queen in the passenger seat, the chip bags, and the flip-flops and the scattered clothing in the backseat.

Outside, Lily was barefoot and dressed in a bathing suit. Maggie opened the door and got out of the car. ‘What are you doing here?’ She was furious with him. He had violated an unspoken agreement.

When she had said, don’t tell, she had also meant Don’t come back. ‘I tried calling you. Your phone was off.’ If he could tell she was angry, he didn’t seem to care. Her phone. She’d been powering down her phone as much as she could since she could only charge it when she worked at Anne’s house.

Besides, she didn’t need to see the texts from her mom. But she realized she’d brought it into Joh- John’s kitchen last night to charge, and never retrieved it. Sh*t. That meant going back for it.

Maggie had slept in her clothes- the same clothes she’d worn to Nathaniel’s party, including a tank top with sequins.

She crossed her arms over her

chest.

‘What’s up?’ He passed her a folded piece of paper. The newest betting slips. ‘Nathaniel’s back on. Derek was disqualified.’ ‘Disqualified?’ Maggie repeated.

She’d only heard of someone being disqualified from Terror once before, years earlier-one of the players was sleeping with a judge. It later turned out that the guy, Mickey Barnes, wasn’t a judge, just pretending to be one so he could get laid. But it was too late. The player was replaced. Marcel shrugged. Behind him, Lily had overturned their bucket of water and was making rivers out of the dirt.

Maggie was glad she wasn’t

listening.

‘Are you going to tell her?’ He asked.

‘You can,’ she said. He looked at her again. Something shifted in his eyes. ‘No, I can’t.’ They stood there for a second. Maggie wanted to ask him what had happened, but she felt too weird. She and Marcel weren’t exactly close-not like that, anyway. She didn’t know what they were. She wasn’t close to anyone.

‘The deal’s off,’ he said after a minute. ‘No splits.’

‘What?’ Maggie was shocked to hear Marcel say it. That meant he knew she knew about his deal with Nathaniel. Did he know about the deal she and

Nathaniel had made? His eyes were almost gray, like a stormy sky.

‘We play the game how it was meant,’ he said, and for the first time, she was almost afraid of him. ‘Winner takes the pot.’

‘Why can’t I come in and see Joh-John?’ Lily was in a bad mood. She’d been whining since she got up. She was too hot. She was dirty. The food that Maggie had for her-more tinned stuff, and a sandwich she’d bought at the 7- Eleven-was gross. Maggie guessed that the adventure of being without a home (she couldn’t bring herself to think of the word homeless,) the newness of it, was wearing off. Maggie gripped the wheel, squeezing out her frustration through her palms.

‘I’m just running in for a second, Lily-belle,’ she said, forcing herself to sound cheerful. She wouldn’t snap, she wouldn’t scream. She would keep it together-all for Lily. ‘And Joh- John’s busy.’ She didn’t know if this was true- she hadn’t been able to call and see whether Joh- John was even home, and part of her was hoping he wasn’t.

She kept flashing back to the kiss, the moment of warmth and rightness - and then the way he had pulled away as the kiss had physically hurt him. I don’t want to lie to you, Maggie.

Never had she been so humiliated in her life. What on earth had possessed her? Thinking about it made her stomach hurt, made her want to drive to the ocean,

and keep running straight into it.

But she needed her phone. She was going to have to suck it up and risk seeing him. She could even do damage control, explaining that she hadn't meant to kiss him so he wouldn't think she was in love with him or something. Her stomach gave another lurch into her throat. She wasn't in love with Joh- John.

Was she…?

'I'll be back in ten,' she said. She'd parked a little way- down the driveway, so if Joh- John was outside, he wouldn't see her car and all the evidence that she was living inside it. The last thing she wanted was more pity for him. There was still evidence of the party in the yard: a few plastic cups, cigarette butts, a pair

of cheap sunglasses swimming in a birdbath filled with mossy water. But everything was quiet. He wasn't home.

But before she could even make it to the front door, Joh- John appeared, carrying a trash bag. He froze when he saw her, and Maggie felt the last flicker of hope that things would be normal, that they could pretend last night had never happened fizzle out.

'What are you doing here?' he blurted out.

'I just came to get my phone.' Her voice sounded weird like it was being replayed on a bad sound system. 'Don't worry, I'm not staying.' She started to move past him, into the house.

He caught her arm. ‘Wait.’ There was something desperate about the way he was looking at her. He licked his lips.

‘Wait-you don’t-I have to explain.’

‘Forget about it,’ Maggie said.

‘No. I can’t-you have to trust me-’ Joh- John pushed a hand through his hair, so it stood up straight. Maggie felt like she could cry. His clown hair; his faded Rangers T-shirt and sweatpants spotted with paint; his smell. She had thought it was hers-she’d thought he was hers-but all this time he’d been growing up and hooking up and having secret crushes and becoming someone, she didn’t know. And she knew, looking at him holding a stupid bag of trash, that she was in love with him and always had been. Since the kiss the

first year. Even before that…

‘You don’t have to explain,’ she said and pushed past him into the house. It had been bright outside, and she was temporarily disoriented by the dark, and she took two unsteady steps toward the living room, where she could hear the fan going, as Joh- John flung open the door behind her.

‘Maggie,’ he said. Before she could respond, another voice called out. A girl’s voice.

‘Joh- John?’

Time stopped. Maggie froze, and Joh- John froze, and nothing moved except the black spots across Maggie’s eyes as her vision slowly adjusted; as she saw a

girl float up out of the shadow, emerging from the darkness of the living room.

Weirdly, although they'd gone to school together forever, Maggie didn't immediately recognize Vivian Trevin. It was the shock of seeing her there, in Joh- John's house, barefooted, holding a mug from Joh- John's kitchen. As though she belonged.

'Hey, Maggie,' Vivian said, taking a sip from her mug. Over the rim, her eyes connected with Joh- John's, and Maggie saw a warning there. Maggie turned to Joh- John. All she saw was guilt: guilt all over him, like a physical force, like something sticky.

'What are you doing here?' Vivian asked, still casual.

‘Leaving,’ Maggie said. She threw herself forward, down the hall, and into the kitchen. She was fighting the feeling that she was going to be sick, fighting the memories threatening to drown her: the times she’d drunk cocoa from that mug, her lips where Vivian’s now where her lips on Joh- John’s-Vivian’s Joh- John. Her phone was still plugged into an outlet near the microwave. Her fingers felt swollen and useless. It took her several tries before she could unplug it.

She couldn’t face passing Joh-John and Vivian again, so she just hurtled out the back door, across the porch, and down into the yard. Idiot. She was such an idiot. She tasted tears before she knew she was crying.

Why would Joh- John go for her, Maggie? He was smart. He was leaving for college. Maggie was a nobody.

Nill…

As in zero. That's why Matt had dumped her too.

No one had ever told her this basic fact: not everyone got to be loved. It was like those stupid bell curves they'd had to study in math class. There was the big, swollen, happy middle, a whale hump full of blissful couples and families eating around a big dining room table and laughing. And then, at the tapered ends, there were the abnormal people, the weirdos and freaks and zeros like her.

She wiped away the tears with

her forearm and took a few seconds to breathe and calm down before she returned to the car. Lily was picking at a mosquito bite on her big toe. She stared at Maggie suspiciously when Maggie got in the car.

‘Did you see Joh- John?’ Lily asked.

‘No,’ Maggie said and put the car in drive.

Contented: 1

WEDNESDAY,

AUGUST 3

Marcel,

Marcel HAD LOST THE RECEIPT

FOR NATALIE'S NECKLACE, and instead had to pawn it for half of what he had paid. He needed the money. It was August 3; he was running out of time. He needed a car for the Joust.

A junkier would do-he was even thinking of buying one off Joh- John. So long as it drove.

He had just finished a shift at Lowe's when he got a text.

He hoped for a wild second it was Natalie; instead, it was from his mom.

'Meet us @ Cambria Memorial as soon as possible!! Dayna…'

Something bad had happened to Dayna.

He tried calling his mom's cell phone, and then Dayna's, and got no response. He barely registered the twenty-minute bus ride to Hudson.

He couldn't sit still. His legs were full of itching, and his heart was lodged underneath his tongue. His phone buzzed in his pocket.

Another text. This time, it was from an unknown number.

Time to go solo. Tomorrow night we'll see what you're made of. He shut his phone, shoved it in his pocket. When he reached Cambria Memorial, he practically sprinted from the bus.

'Marcel! Marcel!' Dayna and his mom were standing outside, by the

handicapped ramp. Dayna was waving frantically, sitting up as tall as she could in her chair. And she was grinning. They both were smiling so big, he could see all their teeth, even from a distance.

Still, his heart wouldn't stop going as he jogged across the parking lot.

'What?' He was breathless by the time he reached them. 'What is it? What happened?'

'You tell him, Day,' Marcel's mom said, still smiling. Her mascara was smudged. She'd been crying.

Dayna sucked in a deep breath. Her eyes were shining; he hadn't seen her look so happy since before the accident.

'I moved, Marcel. I moved my

toes.’ He stared at Dayna, then his mom, then Dayna again. ‘Jesus Christ,’ he finally burst out. ‘I thought something happened. I thought you were dead or something.’ Dayna shook her head. She looked hurt.

‘Something did happen.’ Marcel took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. He was sweating. He jammed on the hat again. Dayna was watching him expectantly. He knew he was being a d*ick.

He exhaled. ‘That’s amazing, Day,’ he said. He tried to sound like he meant it. He was happy; he was just still wound up from the trip over, from being so afraid. ‘I’m proud of you.’ He leaned down and hugged her. And he felt the

tiniest convulsion in her body like she was holding in a sob.

Marcel's mom insisted they go out to eat to celebrate, even though they couldn't afford it, especially now with all the bills.

They ended up at an Applebee's outside Carp. Marcel's mom ordered a margarita with extra salt and nachos for the table to start. Nachos were Marcel's favorite, but he couldn't bring himself to eat. His mom kept prattling on about Bill Kelly: how Bill Kelly was so nice, so thoughtful, even though he was grieving; how Bill Kelly had set them up with the appointment and made a phone call on their behalf and blah, blah, blah.

Her cell phone rang in the middle

of dinner. Marcel's mom stood up.

'Speak of the devil,' she said. 'It's Bill.

He might have news...'

'What kind of news?' Marcel asked when she had stepped outside. He could see her pacing the parking lot. Under the glower of the lights, she looked old. Tired, saggy… more mom-like than normal.

Dayna shrugged.

'Are they screwing or something?' Marcel pressed. Dayna sighed and wiped her fingers carefully on her napkin. She'd been picking apart her burger, layer by layer.

This was something she'd always done: deconstruct her food, put it back together in a way that pleased her. With burgers it was lettuce and tomato on the bottom, then ketchup, then the burger, then bun.

'They're friends, Marcel,' she said, and he felt a flicker of irritation. She was speaking to him in her grown-up voice, a voice that had always grated on him.

'Why do you care, anyway?'

'Mom doesn't have friends,' he said, even though he knew it was kind of mean. Dayna set down her napkin-hard, in her fist, so that the water cups jumped.

'What is up with you?' Marcel

stared at her. ‘What’s up with me?’ ‘Why do you have to give Mom such a tough time? That doctor isn’t cheap. She’s trying.’ Dayna shook her head. ‘Ricky had to leave, like, his whole family to come here-’

‘Please don’t bring Ricky into this.’

‘I’m just saying, we should feel lucky.’

‘Lucky?’ Marcel barked a laugh. ‘Since when did you become such a guru?’

‘Since when did you become such a brat?’ Dayna fired back.

Marcel suddenly felt lost. He didn’t know where the feeling came from,

and he struggled to get out from underneath it. ‘Mom’s clueless. That’s all I’m saying.’ He stabbed at his mac ’n’ cheese to avoid meeting Dayna’s eyes. ‘Besides, I just don’t want you to get your hopes up….’

Now it was Dayna’s turn to stare.

‘You’re unbelievable.’ She spoke in a deep voice, and somehow that was worse than if she’d been screaming. ‘All this time you’ve been telling me to keep trying, keep believing. And then I make progress-’ ‘And what about what I’ve been doing?’

Marcel knew he was being a brat, but he couldn’t help it. Dayna had been on his side-she was the only one on his side and now, suddenly, she wasn’t.

‘You mean the game?’ Dayna shook her head. ‘Look, Marcel. I’ve been thinking. I don’t want you to play anymore.’

‘You what…?’ Marcel exploded; several people at a neighboring table turned to stare.

‘Keep your voice down.’ Dayna was looking at him the way she used to when he was a little kid and didn’t understand the rules of a game, she wanted to play disappointed, a little impatient. ‘After what happened to Bill Kelly - it’s not worth it. It’s not right.’ Marcel took a sip of his water and found he could barely work it down his throat. ‘You wanted me to play,’ he said. ‘You asked me to.’

‘I changed my mind,’ she said. ‘Well, that’s not how the game works,’ he said. His voice was rising again. He couldn’t help it. ‘Or did you forget?’

Her mouth got thin: a straight pink scar on the face. ‘Listen to me, Marcel. This is for you for your good.’

‘I played for you.’ Marcel no longer cared about being overheard. The anger, the sense of loss, ate away the rest of the world, made him careless.

Whom did he have? He had no friends.

He’d never stayed in a place long enough to make them or trust them.

With Maggie, he’d thought he’d gotten close, with Natalie, too. He’d been

wrong, and now even Dayna was turning on him.

‘Did you forget that, too? This is all for you. So that things can go back.’ He hadn’t intended to say the last part- hadn’t even thought- the words until they were out of his mouth. For a second there was silence. Dayna was staring at him, openmouthed, and the words sat between them like something detonated: everything had been blown wide open.

‘Marcel,’ she said. He was horrified to see that she looked like she felt sorry for him. ‘Things can never go back. You know that, right? That’s not how it works. Nothing you do will change what happened.’ Marcel pushed his plate away. He stood up from the table. ‘I’m

going home,’ he said. He couldn’t even think.

Dayna’s words were making a storm inside his head. Things can never go back.

What the hell had he been playing for, all this time?

‘Come on, Marcel,’ Dayna said.

‘Sit down.’ ‘I’m not hungry,’ he said. He couldn’t bring himself to look at her: those patient eyes, the thin, dissatisfied set of her mouth. Like he was a little kid. A dumb kid. ‘Tell mom I said-goodbye.’

‘We’re miles from home,’ Dayna said.

‘I could use the walk,’ Marcel said. He shoved a cigarette in his mouth, even though he didn’t feel like smoking, and hoped it wouldn’t rain.

Maggie,

MAGGIE DIDN’T RETURN TO METH ROW. IT WAS CONVENIENT, in some ways, but there was no privacy in it, now that Marcel knew where she was.

She didn’t want him to be spying on her, seeing how she was living, running his mouth about it. Maggie had been careful, thus far, to move the car only in the middle of the night, from the parking lot to the empty road to the parking lot, when there was less danger of being spotted. She’d developed a routine: on workdays, she set her alarm

for four a.m., and, while Lily was still sleeping, headed through the ink-black to

Anne's house…

She had found a break in the trees just off the driveway where she could park. Sometimes she slept again. Sometimes she waited, watching the black begin to blur and change, turning first to smudgy dark, then sharpening and splitting, peeling off into vivid purple shadows and triangles of light. She tried very hard not to think about the past, or what was going to happen in the future, or anything at all.

Later, when it was nine, she'd walk up to the house, telling Anne that Joh- John had dropped her off. Sometimes Lily came with her. Sometimes she stayed

in the car or played in the woods.

Twice, Maggie had arrived early and chosen to bathe, sneaking through the woods to the outdoor shower. Then she'd stripped, shivering in the cool air, and stepped gratefully under the stream of hot water, letting it run into her mouth and eyes and over her body. Otherwise, she'd been making do with a hose. Maggie had to stop herself from fantasizing about running water, microwaves, air conditioners, and refrigerators, and toilets.

Toilets…

It had been two weeks since she'd left her mom's, and she'd gotten two mosquito bites on her butt while peeing at six a.m. and eaten colder

canned ravioli than she could stomach.

What she wanted to do was make it to Malden Plaza, where they'd crossed the highway to that vast, impersonal parking lot with only a few streetlamps. Truckers came on and off the highway all the time, and cars stayed in the lot overnight. There was a McDonald's, and public restrooms, with showers for the truckers who passed through.

First, they needed gas. It wasn't yet dark, and she didn't want to stop in Carp.

But she'd been running on fumes for twenty-four hours, and she didn't want to break down, either.

So, she pulled into the Citgo on

Main Street, which was the least popular of the three gas stations in town because it was the most expensive and didn't sell beer.

'Stay in the car,' she told Lily.

'Yeah, yes,' Lily mumbled.

'I'm serious, Billy.' Maggie wasn't sure how long she could take this: the sniping, the back-and-forth. She was losing it. Cracking up. Grief had its hands around her neck; she was being choked. She kept seeing Vivian sipping from Joh-John's mug, her black hair hanging in wisps around a pretty, moon-white face. 'And don't talk to anybody, okay?'

She scanned the parking lot: no police cars, no cars she recognized. That

was a good sign. Inside, she put down twenty dollars for gas and took the opportunity to stock up on whatever she could: packages of ramen soup, which they would eat dissolved in cold water; chips and salsa; beef jerky; and two fresh-ish sandwiches.

The man behind the counter, with a dark, flat face and thinning hair slicked to one side, like weeds strapped to his forehead, made her wait for change. While he counted singles into the register, she went to the bathroom.

She didn't like standing under the bright lights of the store, and she didn't like the way the man was looking at her either- like he could see through to all her secrets.

While she was washing her hands, she dimly registered the jangle of the bell above the door, the low murmur of conversation. Another customer. When she left the bathroom, he was blocked from view by a big display of cheap sunglasses, and she was at the counter before she noticed his uniform, the gun strapped to his hip.

A police officer…

‘How’s that Kelly business going?’ the man behind the counter was saying. The police officer with a big belly pushing out over his belt shrugged. ‘Autopsy came in. Turns out Little Kelly didn’t die in that fire.’

Maggie felt like something had hit her in the chest. She tugged her hood

up and pretended to be looking for chips. She picked up a package of pretzels, squinted at it hard.

‘That right?’

‘Sad story. It looks like OD. He’d been taking pills since he came back from the war. Probably just went to that Graybill house for a nice warm place to get high.’

Maggie exhaled. She felt an insane, immediate sense of relief. She hadn’t realized, until now, that she had held herself accountable, at least a little bit, for his murder.

But it wasn’t murder. It hadn’t been.

‘Still, someone started that fire,’

the police officer said, and Maggie realized she'd been staring at the same package of pretzels for several seconds too long, and now the police officer was staring at her. She shoved the pretzels back on their rack, ducked her head, and headed for the door.

'Hey! Hey, miss!'

She froze.

'You forgot your groceries. I got change for you too.'

If she bolted, it would look suspicious. Then the police officer might wonder why she'd freaked. She turned slowly back to the counter, keeping her eyes trained on the ground. She could feel both men staring at her as she collected

the bag of food. Her cheeks were hot, and her mouth felt dry as sand. She was at the door again, in the clear, when the police officer called out to her.

'Hey.' He was watching her closely. 'Look at me.' She forced her eyes up to his. He had a pudgy, doughy-like face. But his eyes were big and round, like a small kid's, or an animal's.

'What's your name?' He said. She said the first name that came to her: 'Vivian.'

He moved gum around in his mouth.

'How old are you, Vivian? You in high school?'

'Graduated,' she said. Her palms

were itching. She wanted to turn and run. His eyes were traveling her face quickly like he was memorizing it.

The police officer took a step closer to her.

‘You ever heard of a game called Terror,

‘Vivian?’

She looked away. ‘No,’ she said in a whisper. It was a stupid lie, and immediately she wished she’d said yes.

‘I thought everybody played Fear,’ the police officer said.

‘Not everyone,’ she said, turning back to him. She saw a spark of triumph in his eyes, as though she’d admitted to

something. God. She was messing this up. The back of her neck was sweating. The police officer stared at her for a few more beats. ‘Go on, get out of here,’ was all he said. Outside, she took a few deep breaths. The air was thick with moisture. A storm was coming-a bad one too, judging from the sky. It was green like the universe was about to get sick. She shoved her hood back, letting the sweat cool off her forehead. She jogged across the parking lot to the pump.

And stopped.

Lily was gone. There was a resonant boom, a sound so loud she jumped. The sky opened, and rain hissed angrily against the pavement. She reached the car just as the first fork of

lightning tore across the sky. She jiggled the door handle. Locked. Where the hell was Lily?

'Maggie!' Lily's voice rang out over the rain.

Maggie turned. A police officer was standing next to a blue-and-white patrol car. He had his hand on her sister's arm. 'Lily!' Maggie ran over, forgetting to be worried about police officers or being careful. 'Let go of her,' she said.

'Calm down, calm down.' The police officer was tall and skinny, with a face like a mule. 'Everyone be calm, okay?'

'Let go of her,' Maggie repeated. The police officer obeyed, and Lily

barreled over to Maggie, wrapping her arms around Maggie's waist like she was a little kid.

'Hold on now,' the police officer said. Lightning flashed again. His teeth were lit up, gray, and crooked. 'I just wanted to make sure the little lady was okay.' 'She's fine,' Maggie said. 'We're fine.' She started to turn away, but the police officer reached out and stopped her.

'Not so fast,' he said. 'We still got a slight problem.'

'We didn't do anything,' Lily piped up.

The police officer squinted at Lily. 'I believe you,' he said, his voice a little

softer. ‘But that right there,’ -and he pointed to the beat-up Taurus-’ is a stolen car.’

The rain was coming down so hard, Maggie couldn’t think. Lily looked sad and extra skinny with her T-shirt stick to her ribs.

The police officer opened the back door of the squad car. ‘Go on and get in,’ he said to Lily. ‘Dry off.’ Maggie didn’t like it; she didn’t want Lily anywhere near the police car. That’s how they got you: they were- were nice, and they lured you into thinking you were- were safe, and then they flipped the tables without warning. She thought of Joh- John and felt her throat squeeze. That was how everyone got you.

But Lily had scooted inside before

Maggie could say, Don’t.

‘How about we go somewhere and

talk?’ The police officer said. At least he didn’t sound mad.

Maggie crossed her arms. ‘I’m fine,’ she said, hoping he wouldn’t see her shiver. ‘And I didn’t steal that car,’ she said. ‘It’s my mom’s car.’ He shook his head. ‘Your mom said you stole it.’ She could barely hear him over the rain. ‘You got quite the setup in the back seat. Food. Blankets.

Clothes.’ A bead of rain rolled off the tip of his nose, and Maggie thought he looked as pathetic as Lily had. She looked

away. She felt the need to tell, to spill, to explain, swelling like a balloon inside her chest, pressing painfully against her ribs. But she just said, ‘I’m not going home. You can’t make me.’

‘Sure, I can.’

‘I’m eighteen,’ she said. ‘With no job, no money, no home,’ he said.

‘I have a job.’ She knew she was being stupid, stubborn, but she didn’t care. She’d promised Lily they wouldn’t go back, and they wouldn’t. Probably if she told her mom, told about the partying and the drugs, she wouldn’t have to go back. But they’d stick her mom in jail and put Lily in some home with strangers who didn’t care about her. ‘I have an excellent job.’

And suddenly it occurred to her:

Anne. She looked at the police officer. ‘Don’t I get one phone call or something?’ For the first time, he smiled. But his eyes were still sad. ‘You’re not under arrest.’

‘I know,’ she said. She was suddenly so nervous, she felt like she would vomit. What if Anne didn’t care? Or worse, sided with the police? ‘But I want my phone call, just the same.’ Marcel HAD ONLY MADE IT HALFWAY HOME WHEN THE sky split open and it began to pour. Just his freaking luck. Within a few minutes, he was soaked.

A car passed, blaring its horn, sending a fierce spray of water across his jeans. He was still two miles from home.

He was hoping the storm would let up, but it got worse.

Lightning ripped across the sky, quick flashes that gripped the world in the weird green glow. Water accumulated fast in the ditches, driving leaves and paper cups onto his shoes.

He was blind; he couldn’t see the oncoming traffic until it was on top of him. He realized, suddenly, that he was only a few minutes away from Joh- John’s. He turned off the road and started jogging. With any luck, Joh- John would be home, and he could wait it out or bum a ride.

But when he came up the driveway, he saw the whole house was dark. Still, he went up to the porch and

knocked on the front door, praying that Joh- John would answer. Nothing. He remembered the back porch was screened in and circled the house through the slog of mud. He banged his shin against an old lawnmower and went stumbling forward, face planting, cursing.

The screen door was, of course, locked. He was wet and so miserable he briefly considered punching a hole through it-but then lightning bit through the sky again, and in that half-second of unnatural brightness, he saw a kind of gardening shed, some little ways back and half-obscured by the trees. The door to the shed was protected by a padlock, but Marcel had his first bit of luck: the lock wasn’t in place. He pushed into the

shed and stood to shiver in the sudden dryness and coolness, inhaling the smell of wet blankets and old wood, waiting for his eyes to adjust. He couldn't see sh*t. Just outlines, dark objects, more junk.

He pulled out his cell phone for light and saw the battery was out.

He couldn't even call Joh- John and ask where he was and when he would be home. Great. But at least in the glow of the screen, he could make a better scan of the shed, and he was surprised to see that it was wired: a plain bulb was screwed into the ceiling, and there was a switch on the wall, too.

The bulb was dim, but it was better than nothing. Immediately he saw that the shed was better organized than

he'd thought.

Certainly, cleaner than the junkyard. There was a stool and a desk and a bunch of shelves. A bunch of betting slips, water-warped and weighted down with a metal turtle, were piled on the desk.

Next to the betting slips was a pile of old A/V and recording equipment, and one of those cheap pay-per-use cell phones, the kind that required no subscription. His second piece of luck: the cell phone powered on and didn't require a password.

He looked in his contacts for Joh-John's cell phone number and managed to retrieve it just before his cell went dead. He thumbed it into the keypad of the cell

phone he'd found and listened to it ring. Five times, then Joh- John's voicemail. He hung up without leaving a message. Instead, he flipped over to the texts, planning to shoot off a 911 to Joh- John. He had to come home sometime.

Where could he be in this weather, anyway?

And then: he froze. The driving of the rain on the roof, even the weight of the cell phone-all of it receded, and he saw only the words of the last outgoing text.

Time to go unaccompanied…

Tomorrow night we'll see what you're made of.

He read it again, and a third time.

The feeling returned in a rush. He scrolled down. More texts: instructions for the game. Messages to other players. And at the very bottom, a text to Maggie's number.

Quit now, before you get hurt. Marcel replaced the phone carefully, exactly where it had been.

Now everything looked different: recording equipment. Cameras… Spray paint stacked in the corner, and plywood leaning against the shed walls. All the stuff Joh- John had needed for the challenges.

A half-dozen mason jars were lined up on one shelf; he bent down to examine them and then cried out, stumbling away, nearly upsetting a stack

of plywood.

Spiders… The jars were full of them -crawling up the glass, deep brown bodies blurring together. Meant for him.

‘What are you doing here?’ Marcel spun around. His heart was still beating hard; he was imagining the feel of a hundred spiders on his skin. Joh- John was standing in the doorway, totally-immobile.

The storm was still raging behind him, sending down sheets of water. He was wearing a hooded rain poncho, and his face was in shadow. For a second, Marcel was truly afraid of him; he looked like a serial killer in some bad horror movie.

Marcel had a sudden flash of clarity: this was what the game was about. This was what true fear was that you could never know other people, not completely. That you were always just guessing blind. Then Joh- John took another step into the shed, shoving off his hood, and the impression passed. It was just Joh- John.

Some of Marcel's fear eased too, although his skin was still prickling, and he was uncomfortably aware of the spiders in their thin glass jars, only a few feet away.

'What the hell, Marcel?' Joh- John burst out. His fists were balled up.

'I was looking for you,' Marcel said, raising both hands, just in case Joh-

John was thinking of swinging at him.

‘I just wanted to get out of the rain.’ ‘You’re not supposed to be in here,’ Joh- John insisted. ‘It’s all right,’ Marcel said. ‘I know, okay? I already know.’ There was a minute of electric silence. Joh- John stared at him. ‘Know what?’ he said at last.

‘Come on, man. Don’t bullsh*t,’ Marcel said quietly. ‘Just tell me one thing: why?

Why?

I thought you hated- Fear.’ Marcel thought Joh- John might not answer, might still try to deny the whole thing. Then his body seemed to collapse like someone had pulled the drain in his

center. He tugged the door closed behind him, then sagged into the chair. For a moment, he sat with his head in his hands. Finally- he looked up.

‘Why did you play?’ he asked.

Revenge, Marcel thought, and Because I have nothing else. But out loud he said, ‘Money. Why else?’ Joh- John gestured wide with his hands.

‘Same…’

‘Really…?’

Marcel watched him closely. There was a look on Joh- John’s face he couldn’t identify. Joh- John nodded, but Marcel could tell he was lying. It was more than that. He chose to let it go.

Everyone needed secrets…

‘So-o what now?’ Joh- John asked. He sounded exhausted. He looked exhausted too. Marcel realized how much it must have weighed on him this summer-all the planning, all the lies.

‘You tell me,’ Marcel said. He leaned back against the desk. He was feeling slightly more relaxed, and grateful that Joh- John was positioned so that he could no longer see the spiders.

‘You can’t tell Maggie,’ Joh- John said, sitting forward, suddenly wild.

‘She can’t know about this all.’

‘Calm down,’ Marcel said. His mind was ticking forward, already adjusting to the added information,

thinking of how he could use it. ‘I’m not going to tell Maggie. But I’m not going to do the solo challenge either. You’re just going to say I did.’ Joh- John stared at him. ‘That’s not fair.’

Marcel shrugged. ‘Maybe not. But that’s how it’s going to go.’ He wiped his palms on his jeans. ‘What were you planning to do with those spiders?’ ‘What do you think?’ Joh- John sounded annoyed. ‘All right. Fine.

You’ll go straight to Joust. Okay?’ Marcel nodded. Abruptly, Joh- John stood up, kicking the chair so it scooched forward a few inches. ‘Jesus.

Do you know, I’m glad you found out? I was almost hoping you would. It’s been awful. Freaking awful.’ Marcel

didn’t say anything stupid, like that Joh- John could have said no when he was approached about being a judge.

So, he just said, ‘It’ll be over soon.’ Joh- John was pacing. Now he whirled around to face Marcel. Suddenly he filled the whole space. ‘I killed him, Marcel,’ he said, choking a little. ‘I’m responsible.’

A muscle flexed in Joh- John’s jaw; it occurred to Marcel that he was trying not to cry. ‘It was part of the game.’ He shook his head. ‘I never meant to hurt anyone. It was a stupid trick. I lit some papers in a trash can. But the fire got out of control so quickly. It just - exploded.

I didn’t know what to do.’

Marcel felt a moment of guilt.

Earlier tonight, when he'd gone off on Dayna about Bill Kelly, he hadn't been thinking of Little Kelly at all. And about how awful his father must feel. 'It was an accident,' he said softly.

'Does it matter?' Joh- John asked. His voice was strangled. 'I should go to jail. I probably will.'

'You won't. Nobody knows.' It occurred to Marcel, though, that Joh- John must have a partner. There were always at least two judges. He knew that Joh- John wouldn't tell him if he asked, though. 'And I won't say anything. You can trust me.'

Joh- John nodded. 'Thanks,' he

whispered. Again, the energy left him at once. He sat down again and put his head in his hands. They stayed like that for a long time, while the rain drummed on the roof, like fists beating to get in.

They stayed until Marcel's leg started to get numb where he was leaning on it, and the noise of the rain receded slightly and became the light scratching of nails.

'I have a favor to ask you,' Joh-John said, looking up. Marcel nodded.

Joh- John's eyes flashed: an expression gone too quickly to interpret.

'It's about Maggie,' he said.

SATURDAY,

AUGUST 6

Maggie,

ANNE HAD DECIDED THAT MAGGIE WAS READY TO FEED the white Bengal's. She had shown Maggie how to unlock the pen and where to place the bucket of meat. Anne took her time doing it sometimes, she even wound up and threw a steak, like a player hurling a Frisbee, and occasionally one of the white Bengals would snap it up in midair.

Maggie always waited until the White Bengal's were on the other side of the pen or lying underneath the trees, where they liked to spend the sunniest afternoons. She worked as quickly as possible, never taking her eyes off them. The whole time she could practically feel

the heat of their breath, the sharp rip of their teeth in her neck.

‘Do you think they miss home?’ Maggie turned around. Lily. Earlier that morning, Lily had helped Anne wrestle Muppet into a bath, and her legs were spotted with muddy water. But she looked cleaner, healthier than she had in weeks. From the other side of the barn, they could hear Anne humming as she pulled daffodils from the garden.

‘I think they’re pretty happy,’ Maggie said, although she’d never really thought about it one way or another. She triple-checked that she’d locked the pen, then turned once again to Lily. Lily’s face was puckered like she was trying to swallow something too big.

‘What about you, Bill?’ she asked, resting a hand briefly on Lily’s head.

‘Do you miss home?’

Lily shook her head so hard her braid whipped her in the face. ‘I want to stay here forever,’ she said, and Maggie knew that the words had been the too-big thing that was choking her.

Maggie had to bend down awkwardly to hug Lily. Still, Lily was growing; she was at Maggie’s chest. It was just one more thing that had changed while Maggie wasn’t paying attention. Like Joh- John.

Like her friendship with Nathaniel.

‘No matter what, we’ll be

together. Okay? We'll be fine.' Maggie put her thumb on Lily's nose, and Lily swatted at her. 'Do you believe me?' Lily nodded, but Maggie could tell that she didn't, not entirely.

It had been three days since Maggie had been picked up by the police officers, and for now, Anne had agreed to let Maggie and Lily stay with her. They were sleeping in the 'blue room:' wallpaper patterned with blue posies, blue coverlets, ruffled blue curtains.

Maggie thought it was the most beautiful room she'd ever seen. Earlier that morning, she'd woken up and Lily's bed had been empty. For a moment, she was seized with fear, until she heard laughter from outside. When she went to

the window, she saw Lily was helping Anne feed the chickens and laughing hysterically as one of them chased her, picking up the feed. The day before, Krista had arrived in the Taurus, which the police officers had returned to her. She refused even to acknowledge Anne but made a big show of embracing Lily, who stood rigidly, her face squashed against Krista's sun freckled chest. Maggie had expected her to be angry about the car, and she was, but she was sober, at least, and trying to put on a good show. She reeked of perfume, and she was wearing her work pants and a blue blouse that puckered under her boobs.

She told Maggie she was sorry, and she wasn't partying anymore, and she

was going to do a better job of paying attention to Lily. But she recited the words stiffly, like an actor reading lines that bored her.

‘So? Are you going to come home?’ She said.

Maggie shook her head. And then she’d seen it: Krista’s face had, for just a minute, transformed.

‘You can’t stay here forever,’ Krista said in a deep voice, so Anne couldn’t hear. ‘She’ll get sick of you.’

Maggie felt something open deep in her stomach. ‘Good-bye, Krista,’ she said.

‘And I won’t let you take my baby, either. Don’t think you’re taking Lily from

me.’ Krista had reached out and grabbed Maggie’s elbow, but seeing Anne move toward them, had quickly released it.

‘I’ll be back soon,’ Krista said loudly with her plastic smile. The words were like a threat. And Maggie had walked around for the rest of the day with that pit in her stomach, even after Anne had approached, unexpectedly, unasked, and given Maggie a big hug.

Don’t worry, she’d said. I’m here for you. Maggie wished she could truly believe it.

The White Bengal’s had moved across the pen now, toward the meat- lazily at first, as though uninterested. They sprang on it in one quick, fluid motion, jaws opening, teeth gleaming

momentarily in the sun. Maggie watched them tear into it and felt a little queasy. What had Anne said on her first day of work? She liked taking in broken and damaged things.

Nonetheless, Maggie couldn't imagine the White Bengals needing help. Her phone buzzed in her back pocket. Natalie… they hadn't spoken since her birthday.

'Maggie?' Natalie's voice sounded distant, as though she were speaking from underwater. 'Did you see the newest?'

'Newest what?' Maggie asked.

Cradling the phone between her ear and shoulder, she shoved open the

door to the toolshed and replaced the keys with the white Bengal pen.

‘The betting slips,’ Natalie said.

-And-

‘Marcel beat his solo challenge. Spiders.’ She paused. ‘One of us is next.’

Maggie’s stomach gave another twist. ‘Or Ray. Or Harold Lee,’ she pointed out.

‘But it’ll be our turn soon,’ Nathaniel said. She paused. ‘Have you - have you spoken to him?’ Maggie knew right away that Nathaniel was talking about Marcel. ‘Not really,’ she said. She hadn’t told Natalie about what Marcel had said: that their deal was off. She suspected that Nathaniel knew as much.

Nathaniel sighed. ‘Let me know, okay?’

‘Yeah, sure,’ Maggie said. There was an awkward pause. She remembered how hysterical Nathaniel had been in the bathroom the other night, with her hands scraped raw from scrubbing. She felt a sudden wave of emotion-love for Natalie, grief for all the things that were never said.

‘And Maggie?’ Nathaniel said.

‘What’s up?’

Nathaniel’s voice was quiet. ‘I couldn’t have done this without you. I would never have gotten this far. You know that, right?’

‘The game’s almost done,’ Maggie said, trying to keep her voice

light.

‘Don’t turn melty on me now.’ As soon as she hung up, she saw she’d missed a text. She clicked over to her messages and felt her breath stick in her mouth.

-Then-

Tomorrow it’s your turn, the message read.

SUNDAY,

AUGUST 7

Maggie,

‘ARE YOU OKAY?’ NATHANIEL ASKED.

‘I’d be better if you’d stop jerking

the wheel,' Maggie said. Then, immediately: 'I'm sorry.'

'It's all right,' Nathaniel said. Her knuckles were tiny half-moons on the wheel. As soon as Maggie saw the sign for Fresh Pines Mobile Park, she felt like her stomach might drop out of her butt. They were headed to Lot 62, only a few rows down from Krista's house.

Even though no one had lived there for ages, it was wired and fitted with a fridge, a table, and a bed.

Maggie knew that people used Lot 62, which had been empty for as long as she could remember, for partying and for other stuff she didn't want to think about. Once, when she was eight or nine, she and Joh- John had gone on a rampage

there, emptying all the beers in the fridge, shaking the cigarette packs and bags of weed they found in the cupboards into the trash cans-like that would stop anyone.

Maggie wondered what Joh- John was doing right now, and whether he'd heard it was her turn for a challenge.

Not… then she found that thinking of him was too painful, so she forced herself to concentrate on Natalie's awful driving.

'At least you're getting it over with,' Nathaniel said. Maggie knew she was trying to be helpful. 'I almost wish it was my turn.'

'No, you don't,' Maggie said.

Already, they were at Lot 62. The shades were pulled, but she could see light glowing in the windows, and people turned to silhouettes inside.

Great… so- she'd have an audience, too. Natalie cut the engine. 'You're going to be great,' she said. She started to get out of the car.

'Hey.' Maggie stopped her. Her mouth was dry. 'You know what you said earlier? Well, I could never have gotten this far without you, either.'

Part: 11

Nathaniel smiled, she looked so-o sad. 'May the best girl win,' she said softly. Inside, the air was hazy with cigarette smoke. -Digging was back, his

face still swollen and shiny, patterned all over with bruises. He was showing off his injuries like they were badges of honor. Maggie was annoyed to see that Ray had come to watch her fail.

There were a few cheap bottles of liquor and some plastic cups on the counter. A group of people was sitting around the table; as Maggie and Nathaniel entered, they turned around as one.

Maggie’s heart stopped. Vivian Trevin had come.

-And-

So, had Matt Hefley.

‘What are you doing here?’ She directed the question to Matt. She didn’t

move from the doorway. She kept thinking that this was part of the test- like a setup.

Terror challenge: see how long Maggie can last without crying in a small trailer with her ex-boyfriend and Joh-John's new girl. Bonus points for not vomiting. Matt stood up from the table so quickly, he nearly overturned his chair.

'Maggie. Hey.' He waved awkwardly like they were standing at a distance instead of five feet from each other.

Maggie could feel Vivian watching her, looking slightly amused. B*tch. And Maggie had never been anything but nice to her. '-Digging asked me to come. For help with -' He trailed off.

‘With what?’ Maggie felt cold.

~*~

She couldn’t feel her mouth, even as it made words. Matt turned a deep red. Maggie used to like that about him-how he was an easy blush. Now she thought he just looked stupid. ‘With the gun,’ he said finally.

For the first time, Maggie became aware of the object on the table, around which everyone had gathered. Her breath froze in her throat, becoming a hard block.

She couldn’t swallow, not a pack of cards: a gun. The gun-the one Maggie had stolen from Trigger-Happy Jack’s place. But no, that was impossible. She

was losing it. Joh- John had taken the gun and locked it away in his glove box.

Maggie wasn't sure she could tell the difference between guns, anyway. They all looked the same: like horrible metal fingers, pointing the way to something evil.

She remembered, suddenly, listening as a small child while Krista was drinking with the neighbors in the kitchen. 'Now Maggie's father - he was a mess. Offed himself right after the baby came along. Came home and found his brain splattered on the wall.' Pause. 'Can't say I blame him, sometimes.'

'Please…?

Just for a minute?' Matt had come

even closer. He was staring at Maggie with his big cow eyes, pleading; she belatedly registered that he had asked her whether they could talk. He lowered his voice. ‘Outside?’

‘No.’ Everything Maggie thought was taking a long time to turn into words, into action.

‘What…?’ Matt looked momentarily confused. He wasn’t used to having Maggie stand up for herself. Delaney always said yes to him too.

‘If you want to talk, you can talk to me here.’ Maggie was aware that Nathaniel was doing her best to pretend she wasn’t listening. Vivian, on the other hand, was still staring at her.

Matt coughed. He blushed again.

‘Look, I just wanted to tell you - I’m sorry. Everything happened between us. The Delaney thing-’ He looked away. He was doing his best to seem apologetic, but Maggie knew that he was gloating, just a little bit, to be in the position of having to apologize. He was in control.

He shrugged…

‘You have to believe, it just kind of - happened.’ She felt a rush of hatred for him. How had she ever believed she was in love with him? He was a dolt, just like Nathaniel said.

At the same time, an image of Joh- John rose in her mind: Joh- John in his stupid sweatpants and flip-flops,

grinning at her; sharing an iced coffee, sharing the same straw, mindless of backwash and the fact that Maggie always chewed her straws to bits; lying side by side on the hood of his car, surrounded by crushed cans, which Joh-John said would make the aliens more likely to abduct them. Saying, Please, please, take me away from here, alien friends! And laughing.

'Why are you telling me this now?' Maggie said.

Matt looked startled, as though he'd expected her to thank him. 'I'm telling you now because you don't have to do this. You don't have to go through with it. Look, I know you, Maggie. And this isn't you.'

She felt like she'd been socked in the stomach. 'You think this is about you? About what happened?' Matt sighed. She could tell he thought she was being difficult. 'I'm just saying you don't have to prove anything.'

A vibration went through Maggie -tiny electrical pulses of anger. 'Freak off, Matt,' she said. By now, the people in the room were no longer pretending not to be listening. But she didn't care.

'Maggie-' He reached for her arm as she started to move past him.

She shook him off. 'This was never about you.' That wasn't, she realized, 100 percent true. She had entered at least, she thought she had-out of a sense of desperation, a sense that her

life was over when he dumped her.

But she was playing for herself now, for herself and Lily; she was playing because she had made it this far; she was playing because if she won, it would be the first and only time she had ever won something in her life. ‘And you don’t know me. You never did.’ He let her go. She was hoping he would leave, now that he had come to say what he had to say, but he didn’t.

He crossed his arms and leaned against the bathroom door, or the sheet of graffiti-printed plywood where the bathroom door should have been because the plumbing lines hadn’t been connected. Just for a second, she saw Matt Hefley and Ray Hanrahan exchange

a glance. Imperceptibly, Matt gestured to him.

Like, I did what I could. She felt a twin surge of disgust and triumph. So now Ray was enlisting Matt's help to get Maggie to drop out. It was Ray who'd sent her that text in June telling her to quit Fear. He thought she was a real threat.

And that made her feel powerful.

'What is this…?' She said, gesturing with her chin to the gun. Her voice was overloud, and she was aware that everyone was watching her-Matt, Ray, Nathaniel, Vivian, and all the rest of them. It was like a painting; and at the center, framed in light, was the gun.

'Russian roulette.' -Digging

sounded almost apologetic. He added quickly, ‘You only have to pull the trigger once.

‘Harold had to do it too.’

‘But Harold didn’t do it.’ Vivian spoke up. Her voice was deep and slow and reminded Maggie of warmer places.

Places where it never rained.

She forced herself to meet Vivian’s eyes. ‘So, Harold is out?’

Vivian shrugged. ‘Guess so.’ She had one foot on the chair, knee up to her chest, and she fiddled unconcernedly with the necklace she was wearing.

Maggie could see her collarbones protruding from her tank top. Like baby

bird bones. She had an image of Joh- John kissing that spot and looked away. So, Harold was out. That left just four players.

'All right,' she said. She could hardly swallow. 'All right,' she repeated. She knew she should get it over with, but her hands wouldn't move from her sides. Nathaniel was staring at her, horrified, as though Maggie was already dead.

'Is it loaded?' someone asked. 'It's loaded.' It was Ray who answered. 'I checked.' But even he looked queasy, and he wouldn't meet Maggie's eyes.

Don't be afraid, she told herself. But it had the opposite effect. She was rooted, paralyzed with fear. How many chambers were in a gun? What were her

chances? She'd always been crap at things like that-probabilities.

She kept hearing her mom's voice: Came home and found his brain splattered on the wall… She had no choice unless she wanted the game to end here, now. Then what would Lily do? But what would happen to Lily if Maggie blew her brains out? She saw her hand leave her side and reach for the gun. Her hand looked pale and foreign, like some weird creature you'd find living in the ocean.

Behind her, Nathaniel gasped. Suddenly the door flew open behind them, with such force that it banged hard against the wall. Everyone turned simultaneously, as though they were all puppets on the same string.

Marcel,

Maggie felt immediately disappointed; she knew that deep down, she'd been hoping for Joh- John.

'Hey,' she said. But Marcel didn't answer. He just crossed the small space toward her, shoving Matt out of the way.

'It was you,' he said. His voice was low and full of spite.

Maggie blinked. 'What?' 'You told someone about the spiders,' he said. He glared at Natalie next. 'Or you did.'

Ray snickered. Marcel ignored him.

'What are you talking about?' It had not occurred to Maggie to wonder

how the judges had known about

Marcel’s fear of spiders. But now she did. How did they know about any of them? Her stomach tightened, and she was worried she might throw up.

‘Neither of us said anything,

Marcel, I promise.’ That was Natalie. Marcel stared at each of them in turn. Then, unexpectedly, he reached out and seized the gun. Several people gasped and -Digging ducked like he expected Marcel to start firing.

‘What are you doing?’ Vivian said.

Marcel did something with the gun -opened the chamber, Maggie thought, although his fingers moved so quickly, she couldn’t be sure. Then he

replaced it on the table.

‘I wanted to be sure it was loaded,’ he announced. ‘Fair’s fair.’

Now he wouldn’t look at Maggie at all.

He just crossed his arms and waited.

‘Poor Marcel,’ Ray said. He didn’t bother to stifle a laugh. ‘Afraid of itsy-bitsy spiders.’

‘Your turn’s coming, Hanrahan,’ Marcel said calmly. This made Ray stop laughing.

The room got quiet. Maggie knew there would be no more interruptions. No more distractions. She felt as though

someone had turned the lights up. It was too hot, too bright. She took the gun. Maggie heard Nathaniel say, ‘Please.’ Maggie knew that everyone was still watching her, but she could make out no individual faces: everyone had been transformed into vague blobs, suggestions of color and angles. Even the table began to blur.

The only real thing was the gun: heavy and cold. She fumbled a little to get her finger on the trigger. She couldn’t feel her body anymore from the waist down. This was what it was like to die: a slow numbing.

She placed the gun to her temple, felt the cool bite of metal on her skin, like a hollow mouth. This was what my father

must have felt like, she thought.

She closed her eyes- at once…

Nathaniel screamed, ‘Don’t do it!’ At the same time, a chair clattered to the floor and several voices called out at once.

She squeezed the trigger.

Click…

Nothing. Maggie opened her eyes.

Instantly, the room was a roar of sound. People were on their feet, cheering. Maggie was so weak with joy and relief she found she couldn’t hold on to the gun and let it fall to the floor. Then Natalie had rocketed into Maggie’s arms.

‘Oh, Maggie, oh, Maggie,’ she kept saying.

‘I’m so sorry.’ Maggie was saying, ‘It’s okay, it’s okay,’ but she didn’t feel the words leave her mouth. Her lips were numb, her tongue was numb, her body was quivering like it was preparing to disintegrate. When Nathaniel released her,

Maggie thudded into a chair.

It was over…

She was alive…

Someone pressed a drink into her hand, and she sipped gratefully before noticing it was warm beer. Then -Digging was in front of her, saying, ‘I didn’t think you’d do it. Wow. Holy sh*t.’ She didn’t

know whether Matt congratulated her; if he did, she didn't register it.

Vivian smiled at her but said nothing.

Even Marcel came over. 'Look, Maggie,' he said, kneeling so they were at eye level. For a second, his eyes searched hers, and she was sure he was going to tell her something important.

Instead, he just said, 'Keep this safe, okay?' and pressed something into her hand. She slipped it mindlessly into her pocket.

Suddenly, Maggie wanted to get out of there more than anything. Away from the too-close smells of beer and old cigarettes and other people's breath; far

away from Fresh Pines, where she had never intended to return in the first place. She wanted to be back at Anne's house, in the blue room, listening to the wind sing through the trees, listening to Lily's sleep murmurs. It took her two attempts to get to her feet. She felt like her body had been sewn together backward.

'Let's go, okay?' Nathaniel said. Her breath smelled a little like beer, and normally Maggie would have been annoyed that she was drinking right before they were going to drive. But she didn't have the strength to argue, or even to care.

'That was epic,' Nathaniel said, as soon as they were in the car. 'Seriously, Maggie. Everyone will be talking about it

for years. I do think it's unfair, though. I mean, your challenge was, like, a billion times harder than Marcel's. You could have died.'

Can we not talk about this?' Maggie said. She unrolled her window a little, inhaling the smell of pine and climber moss. Alive.

'Sure, yes.' Nathaniel looked over at her. 'Are you okay?'

'I'm okay,' Maggie said. She was thinking her way into the deepness of the woods, the soft spaces of growth and shadow. She shifted to lean her head against the window and felt something in her pocket. She remembered what

Marcel had given her. She

wondered whether he felt guilty about his earlier outburst.

She reached into her pocket. Just then they passed under a streetlamp, and as Maggie uncurled her fingers, time seemed to stop for a second. Everything was perfectly still: Nathaniel with both hands on the wheel, mouth open to speak; the trees outside, frozen in anticipation.

Maggie's fingers half-uncurled. And the bullet, resting in the fleshy middle of her palm.

SUNDAY,

AUGUST 14

IT WAS ALREADY THE SECOND WEEK OF AUGUST. The game was ending. Four players remained: Marcel,

Maggie, Nathaniel, and Ray.

For the first time since the game began, people began to place bets that Maggie would win, although Ray and Marcel were still evenly split for the favorite.

Maggie heard that Ray passed his solo challenge: he'd broken into the county morgue in East Juniper and stayed locked up next to the corpses all night. Creepy, odd, and weird, but not likely to kill him; Maggie was still angry that her challenge had been the worst. But then, of course, there was the fact that Marcel had ensured her challenge would be harmless too.

Marcel, who had palmed a bullet while making a show of checking the gun

for ammo. Marcel, who now refused to pick up her phone calls. It was such a joke. Joh- John called Maggie incessantly. Then that moment she called out the name- Marcel.

Krista called Maggie. No one picked up for anyone else. Like some mixed-up game of telephone. Nathaniel stayed out of it. She had still not been given her solo challenge.

Every day, Nathaniel grew paler and skinnier. For once, she wasn't chattering endlessly about all the guys she was dating. She'd even announced, solemnly, that she thought she might try and stay away from guys for a while.

Maggie didn't know if it was the game or whatever had happened on the

night of Nathaniel's birthday, but Nathaniel reminded Maggie of a painting she'd once seen reproduced in a history textbook, of a noblewoman awaiting the guillotine.

A week after Maggie's challenge, the blade fell. Maggie and Nathaniel had taken Lily to the mall to see a movie, mostly to get out of the heat-it had been recorded ninety-five degrees for three straight days, and Maggie felt as if she was moving through soup. The sky was a scorched, pale blue; the trees were motionless in the shimmering heat.

Afterward, they returned in Nathaniel's car to Anne's house. Nathaniel knew, at last, that Maggie wasn't living at home, and had offered to

come sleep at Anne's with her, even though she disliked the dogs and wouldn't even get close to the White Bengal's pen. But Anne had left town for the weekend to visit her sister-in-law on the coast, and Maggie hated being in the big, old house without her.

That was one good thing about the trailer: you always knew what was, where the walls were, who was home. Anne's house was different: full of wood that creaked and groaned, ghost sounds, mysterious thumps, and scratching noises.

'Get it,' Nathaniel said when her phone dinged between her legs.

'Ewe. I'm not reaching for it,' Maggie said.

Nathaniel giggled and tossed the phone at her, taking her hand off the wheel only briefly. She swerved, and Lily yelped from the backseat.

‘Sorry, Bill,’ Nathaniel said.

‘Don’t call me that,’ Lily said primly. Nathaniel laughed. But Maggie was sitting with the phone in her lap, ice running through her wrists, into her hands.

‘What’s the matter?’ Nathaniel asked.

Then her face got serious. ‘Is it-?’ She cut herself off and glanced in the rearview at Lily, who was listening attentively.

Maggie read the text again.

Impossible… ‘Did you tell anyone you were sleeping over at Anne’s tonight?’ she asked, in a muffled voice.

Nathaniel shrugged. ‘My parents. And Joh- John. I think I mentioned it to Joey, too.’

Maggie slid Nathaniel’s phone shut and chucked it into the glove compartment. Suddenly she wanted it as far from her as possible.

‘What…?’ Nathaniel asked.

‘Someone knows that Anne’s gone,’ Maggie said. She turned the radio up so Lily couldn’t eavesdrop.

‘The judges know.’ Who had Maggie told? Marcel-she’d mentioned it to him in a text. Said he should come

over, so they could talk, so she could thank him. And of course, Anne had told some people, probably; it was Carp, and people talked because they had nothing else to do.

The implication of what Maggie had just read-what Nathaniel would have to do sank in. She unrolled her window, but the blast of warm air gave her no relief.

She shouldn't have drunk so much soda at the movie theater. She was nauseous.

'What is it?' Nathaniel said. She looked afraid. Unconsciously, she'd begun tapping out a rhythm on the steering wheel. 'What do I have to do?' Maggie looked at her. Her mouth tasted like ash,

and she found she could not even speak a complete sentence.

‘The white Bengal’s,’ she said.

Marcel,

THE CHALLENGES were ALWAYS POPULAR, BUT THIS year, many spectators had been staying away. It was too risky. The police had threatened to haul in anyone associated with Fear, and everyone was worried about taking the rap for the fire at the Graybill house.

The rumor was Sadowski wanted someone-anyone-to take the fall. The roads, usually so empty, were infested with police cars, some from other counties.

But the word-white Bengal’s-was

too much to resist. It had its lift and momentum: it flitted through the woods, stole its way into houses barred up against the heat, spun into the rhythm of fans that cycled in bedrooms across-Carp.

By afternoon, all the players and ex-players and spectators and bettors and welshes and squealers-everyone who cared even remotely about the game and its outcome-had heard about the white Bengal's of Mansfield Road. Marcel was lying naked on his bed with two fans going at once when the text came in from Maggie. For a second, he was not sure whether he was sleeping or awake.

His room was dark and as hot as a mouth. He did not want to open the

door, though. Ricky was over again, and he had brought food for Dayna, stuff he'd cooked himself at the dinner, rice and beans, and shrimp that smelled like burned garlic. They were watching a movie, and occasionally, despite the noise of the ancient fans and the closed door, he could hear the muffled sound of laughter.

The effort of sitting up made Marcel begin to sweat. He punched in Joh- John's number.

'What the hell?' He said when Joh- John picked up. No preamble. No bullsh*t. 'How could you do it? How could you make her do it?'

Joh- John sighed. 'Rules of the game, Marcel. I'm not the only one in control of this sh*t.' He sounded

exhausted. ‘If I don’t make it hard enough, I’ll get replaced. And then I won’t be able to help at all.’

Marcel ignored him. ‘She’ll never go through with it. She shouldn’t.’

‘She doesn’t have to.’ Marcel felt like throwing his phone against the wall, even though he knew what Joh- John said was true. For Marcel’s plan to succeed, Nathaniel would have to drop out anyway, and soon. Still, it felt unfair. Too hard, too dangerous, like Maggie’s challenge. But at least there, Joh- John-and Marcel-had made sure she wouldn’t be in any real danger. ‘Maggie will find a way to help her,’ Joh- John said, as though he could read Marcel’s thoughts. ‘You don’t know that,’ Marcel said and hung up. He didn’t

know why he was so angry.

He'd known the rules of Terror from the start. But somehow everything had gotten out of control. He wondered whether Joh- John would show tonight, whether he could face it. Poor Natalie. He thought about calling her and trying to convince her to drop out, to leave it, but then he thought about how she'd returned the necklace to him, and what he'd said to her that night -about opening her legs. It made him hot with shame. She had a right not to speak to him. She had a right to hate him, even.

But he will go tonight. And even if she did hate him, even if she ignored him completely, he wanted her to know that he was there. That he was sorry, too, for

what he had said.

Time, for him, was running out.

Maggie- ONE OF the MAGGIE'S PROBLEMS- OUT OF ABOUT A HUNDRED big problems- was what to do about Lily.

Anne had left them food for the weekend -mac 'n' cheese, not from a box, but made with real cheese and milk and little spiral pasta, and tomato soup. Just heat it - made Maggie feel like a criminal: Anne had invited them into her home, was taking care of them, and Maggie was plotting behind her back. Maggie watched Lily polish off three portions. She didn't know how Lily could eat in this heat. All the fans were going, all the windows were open, but it was still sweltering.

She couldn’t have taken even a mouthful. She was sick with weakness and resolutions. Outside, the sky was turning to milk, the adumbrations were dividing long on the soil. It wouldn’t be long before sundown, and amusement time.

Maggie wondered what Natalie was doing. She’d been locked upstairs for the past three hours. Maggie had heard the shuddering of pipes, the gush of water in the shower, three times.

After Lily ate, Maggie brought her into the sanctum: a big, dark room that still bore the sign of Anne’s late husband- beat-up leather furniture and mohair blankets and rug that smelled a little like wet dog and old man ass with a

hint of harry ball-sack.

Here it was a little cooler, although the leather stuck uncomfortably to Maggie's thighs when she sat down. 'I need you to promise me that you won't come outside,' Maggie said.

'There will be people. And you might hear noises. But you must stay right here, where it's safe. Promise me.'

Lily frowned. 'Does Anne know?' She asked.

That guilty feeling rode a wave up into Maggie's throat. She shook her head. 'And she won't,' she said. Lily picked at a bit of stuffing that had begun to poke out of the couch. She was silent for a second. Maggie wished, suddenly, she could take

Lily into her arms and squeeze her, tell her everything -how scared she was, how she didn't know what would happen to either of them.

'This is about Fear, isn't it?' Lily said. She looked up. Her face was expressionless, her eyes flat. They reminded Maggie of the White Bengal's eyes: ancient, all-seeing. Maggie knew there was no point in lying. So, she said, 'It's almost over.'

Lily didn't move when Maggie kissed her head, which smelled like grass and sweat. The leather released Maggie's skin with a sharp sucking sound. She put on a DVD about a zoo, which Lily had requested- another gift from Anne. Anne, Maggie knew, was a good person. The

best person Maggie had ever met.

So, what did that make Maggie? She was at the door when Lily spoke up. ‘Are you going to win?’ Maggie turned around to her. She’d left the lights off, so it would stay cool, and Lily’s face was in shadow. Maggie tried to smile. ‘I’m already winning,’ she lied and closed the door behind her.

The haze of the sky, milk-white and scorched, at last, turned to dark; and the trees impaled the sun, and all the light broke apart. Then they came: quietly, tires moving soundlessly on the dirt, headlights bouncing like overgrown fireflies through the woods. There was no thudding music, no shouting. Everyone was on alert for police officers.

Maggie stood outside, waiting. The dogs were going crazy; she kept feeding them treats, trying to get them to shut up. She knew there were no neighbors around for miles, but she couldn't shake the feeling that someone would hear- that Anne would know, somehow, be summoned back to the house by the barking.

Nathaniel had still not come down. Maggie had fed the white Bengals more than double their normal amount. Now, as the last light drained from the sky, and the stars began to pulse through the liquid haze of heat, they were lying on their sides, asleep and indifferent to all the cars.

Maggie prayed they would stay

that way that Nathaniel could do whatever she needed to do and get out.

Car after car: -Digging, Ray Hanrahan, even some of the players who'd been Eliminated early, like Cory Walsh and Ellie Hayes; Mindy Crammer and a bunch of her dance team friends, still dressed in bikinis and cutoffs and bare feet, like they'd just come from the beach; Even Sell or, eyes red-rimmed and liquid, obviously drunk, with two friends Maggie didn't recognize; people she hadn't seen since the challenge at the water tower. Matt Hefley, too, and Delaney. He walked right by Maggie, pretending she didn't exist. She found she didn't care.

They drifted across the yard and

gathered around the White Bengal's pen, silent, disbelieving. Flashlights clicked on as it got darker; the floodlights on the barn, motion-detected, came on too, Illuminating the white Bengal's, sleeping almost side by side, so still they might have been statues, held in a flat palm of the earth.

'I don't believe it,' someone whispered.

'No freaking way.' But there they were: no matter how many times you blinked or looked away. White Bengal's. A bit of a miracle, a circus wonder, right there on the grass under the Carp trees and the Carp sky. Maggie was relieved to see Marcel arrive on his bicycle. She still hadn't had a chance to thank him in

person for what he'd done.

Almost immediately, he asked, 'Is Joh- John here?'

She shook her head. He made a face.

'Marcel,' she said. 'I wanted to say…'

'Don't.' He put a hand on her arm and squeezed gently. 'Not yet…'

She didn't know exactly what he meant. She wondered, for the first time, what Marcel was planning to do this fall, and whether he would remain in Carp, or whether he had plans for a job somewhere-or even college. She'd never paid any attention to how he did in school.

Suddenly the thought of Marcel leaving made her sad. They were friends or something like it that was close enough.

It struck her how sad it was that all of them-the kids standing here, her classmates and friends, and even the people she'd hated-had grown up on top of one another like small animals in a too-small cage, and now would simply scatter. And that would be the end of that. Everything that had happened- those stupid school dances and basement after-parties, football games, days of rain that lulled them all to sleep in math class, summers swimming at the creek and stealing sodas from the coolers at the back of the 7-Eleven, even now, this, Fear-

would be sucked away into memory and vapor, as though it hadn't even happened at all.

'Where's Natalie?' That was - Digging. He was speaking softly, as if afraid to wake the white Bengal's. Hardly anyone made a sound. They were all still transfixed by the sight of those dreamlike creatures, stretched long on the ground like shadows.

'I'll get her,' Maggie said. She was grateful to have an excuse to go into the house, even for a moment. What she was doing, what she was helping Nathaniel do, was too horrible. She thought of Anne's face, her smile pulling her eyes into a squint.

She'd never felt so much like a

criminal, not even when she'd taken her mom's car and run away. Another car was arriving, and she knew from the spitting and hissing of its engine that it was Joh-John. She was right. Just as she reached the front door, he climbed out of his car and spotted her.

'Maggie!' Even though he wasn't shouting, his voice seemed to her like a slap in the silence. She ignored him. She stepped into the kitchen and found Natalie sitting at the table, eyes red. There was a shot glass in front of her, and a bottle of whiskey.

'Where'd you get that?' Maggie asked.

'In the pantry.' Nathaniel didn't even look up. 'I'm sorry. I only had a sip,

though.’ She made a face. ‘It’s awful.’

‘It’s time,’ Maggie said. Nathaniel nodded and stood up. She was wearing denim shorts and no shoes; her hair was still wet from the shower.

Maggie knew that if Nathaniel weren't so afraid, she would have insisted on putting on makeup, on doing her hair. Maggie thought Nathaniel had never looked so beautiful. Her fierce and fearful friend- who loved country music and cherry Pop-Tarts and singing in public and pink, who was terrified of germs and dogs and ladders.

‘I love you, Nathaniel,’ Maggie said on impulse.

Nathaniel looked startled, as

though she'd already forgotten Maggie was there.

'You, too, Heath bar,' she said. She managed a small smile. 'I'm ready.' Joh- John was standing some little ways, from the house, pacing, bringing his fingers up to his lips and down again as though he were smoking an invisible cigarette. As Nathaniel moved into the crowd, he caught up with Maggie.

'Please…' His voice was hoarse.

'We need to talk.'

'This is kind of an inconvenient time.' Her voice came out harsher, more sarcastic than she'd intended. It occurred to her that she hadn't seen Vivian, and she wondered whether Joh- John had

begged her not to come. Please, babe. Just until I can patch things up with Maggie.

She's jealous, you know - she always had a thing for me. The thought made her throat knot up, and a part of her just wanted to tell Joh- John to freak off. Then there was the part of her that wanted to put her arms around his neck and feel his laughter humming through his chest, feel the wild tangle of his hair on her face. Instead, she crossed her arms as if she could press the feeling down.

'I need to tell you something.'

Joh- John licked his lips. He looked awful. His face was sickly, different shades of yellow and green, and

he was too skinny. ‘It’s important.’

‘Later, okay?’ Before he could protest, she moved past him. Natalie had reached the fence, closer to the White Bengal’s than she had ever allowed herself to go. Unconsciously, the crowd had backed off a little, so she was surrounded by a halo of negative space- like she was Contaminated with something contagious. Maggie jogged over to her. Now the dogs started up again, shattering the stillness, and Maggie hushed them sharply as she passed the kennel. She pushed easily through the crowd and stepped into Nathaniel’s open circle, feeling as if she were trespassing.

‘It’s okay,’ she whispered. ‘I’m

here.’ But Nathaniel didn’t seem to hear her.

‘The rules are simple,’ -Digging said. Even though he was speaking at a normal volume, to Maggie it sounded like he was shouting. She began praying the White Bengal wouldn’t wake up. They still hadn’t even lifted their heads. She noticed a bit of the steak she’d given them earlier was still untouched, buzzing with flies, and couldn’t decide if that was a good thing or not. ‘You go into the pen, you stand with the White Bengal’s for ten seconds, you get out.’ He emphasized this last part just slightly.

‘How close?’ Nathaniel said.

Part: 12

‘What?’

‘How close do I have to get?’ She asked, turning to him.

-Digging shrugged. ‘Just inside, I guess.’

Nathaniel pushed out a small breath. Maggie smiled at her encouragingly, even though she felt like her skin was made of clay about to crack. But if the white Bengal’s slept, Nathaniel would have no problem. They were a full forty feet away from the gate. Nathaniel wouldn’t even have to go near them.

‘I’ll time you,’ -Digging said. Then:

‘Who has the key to the gate?’

‘I do.’ Maggie stepped forward. She heard a slight rustle, as everyone turned to stare at her; she felt the heat of all those eyes on her skin. The air was leaden, totally still.

Maggie fumbled in her pocket for the key to the padlock. Nathaniel’s breathing was rapid and shallow, like an injured animal. For a second, Maggie couldn’t feel the key and didn’t know whether to be relieved; then her fingers closed around the metal.

In the silence and the stillness, the click of the padlock seemed as loud as a rifle report. She un-looped the heavy chain carefully and laid it on the ground, then slid the metal latches back, one by one, desperately trying to stall, trying to

give Nathaniel a few more seconds. As the final latch clanged open, both white Bengals lifted their heads in unison, as though sensing that something was coming.

The whole group inhaled as one.

Nathaniel let out a whimper.

‘It’s okay,’ Maggie told her, gripping Nathaniel by the shoulders. She could feel Nathaniel trembling under her hands. ‘Ten seconds. You just must step inside the gate. It’ll be done before you know it.’

People had started buzzing, giggling- nervously, shifting. Now the stillness was replaced with electric energy. And as Nathaniel took one halting

step toward the gate, and then another, the White Bengal's, too, stood up-twisting onto their feet, stretching, yawning their enormous jaws so their teeth glistened in the floodlight -as though they had decided to perform.

Nathaniel paused with a hand on the gate.

Then her other hand. Then both hands. Her mouth was moving, and Maggie wondered if she was counting or praying, whether for Nathaniel they were the same thing. Dwarfed by the gate, silhouetted against the sharp, unnatural light, she looked unreal, one-dimensional, like a cardboard cutout.

'You don't have to do it.'

Marcel’s… voice was loud and so unexpected that everyone turned to stare. Nathaniel turned too, and Maggie saw her frown. Then she pulled open the gate and stepped inside.

Part: 13

‘Start the timer,’ Maggie cried out.

She saw -Digging fumbling for his phone.

‘Now…’

‘Okay, okay,’ -Digging said. ‘Time!’ It was too late. The White Bengal’s had started to move. Slowly, their massive heads swinging between their shoulder blades like some awful clock pendulum - tick, tick, tick. But still,

they were too close, already too close; three strides and they covered five yards, mouths open, grinning.

‘Three seconds!’ -Digging announced.

Impossible. Surely Nathaniel had been in the pen for ten minutes, for half an hour, forever. Maggie’s heart was bursting out of her throat. No one spoke. No one moved. Everything was a black sea, dim and featureless: everything but the bright circle of white light, and the cardboard cutout Nathaniel, and the long shadow of the white Bengal’s. Nathaniel was shaking now, and whimpering, too. Maggie feared for a second that she would collapse. Then what? Would the white Bengal’s pounce? Would she,

Maggie, be brave enough to try to stop them?

She knew she wouldn't. Her legs were water, and she could hardly breathe.

'Seven seconds!' -Digging's voice was shrill, like an alarm.

The White Bengals were less than eight feet from Nathaniel. They would be on top of her in two more paces. Maggie could hear them breathing, see their whiskers twitching, tasting the air. Nathaniel had started to cry. But she still held herself there, rigid. She was too scared to move. Their eyes, like deep black pools, had transfixed her.

'Eight seconds!' Then one of the white Bengal's twitched; a muscle flexed,

and Maggie knew it was getting ready to pounce, felt it, knew it would jump on Natalie and tear her apart and they would all stand, watching, helpless. And just as she was trying to scream Run but couldn't, because her throat was too thick with terror, Nathaniel did run. Someone else screamed it.

There was noise suddenly-people shouting-and Nathaniel was out of the gate and slamming it shut, leaning back, crying.

Just as the white Bengal, the one Maggie had been sure was moving to spring, lay down again.

'Nine seconds,' -Digging said above the sudden roar of sound. Maggie registered a small burst of triumph-

Nathaniel was out of the game and then a stronger pull of shame. She pushed over to Nathaniel and drew her into a hug.

‘You were amazing,’ she said into the top of Nathaniel’s hair.

‘I didn’t make it,’ Nathaniel said. Her voice was muffled and her face sticky against Maggie’s chest.

‘You were still amazing,’ Maggie said.

Nathaniel was the only one who wasn’t celebrating. She returned almost immediately to the house. But everyone else seemed to forget about the threat of cops, forget about what had happened at the Graybill house and about the body of Little Kelly, found charred and blackened

in the basement for a short while, it felt almost as it had at the beginning of the summer when the players had first made the jump.

It took more than an hour for Maggie to get everyone out, into their cars and off the property, and the whole time the dogs were going crazy and the White Bengal's were still again, as though deliberately making a point. By the time the yard was almost empty of cars, exhaustion numbed Maggie's fingers and toes. But it was over, thank God. It was all over, and Anne would never have to know. There were only three players left.

And Maggie was one of them.

'Maggie,' Joh- John tried again when everyone had gone. 'We need to

talk.’

‘Not tonight, Joh- John.’ A few people were lingering, leaning up against their cars, hands down each other’s pants. Strange how just a few months ago she had been one of them, hanging out at parties with Matt, her capital B Boyfriend, flaunting it however she could. Wearing his sweatshirts, his baseball hats, like a badge of something -that she was lovable, that she was fine, and normal and just like everybody else. Already the old Maggie seemed like someone she barely knew.

‘You can’t avoid me forever,’ Joh-John said, deliberately moving in front of her as she stooped to collect a cigarette pack, half trampled into the grass. She straightened up. His hair was poking out

from every side of his hat, like something alive trying to get out.

She obtained the urge to reach up and try and fight it into the configuration. The most dangerous was that when she looked at him now, she still saw their kiss: the heat that had roared through her and the mellowness of his lips and the brief instantaneous moment when his tongue had found hers.

'I'm not avoiding you,' she said, looking away so she wouldn't have to remember. 'I'm just tired.'

'When, then?' He looked lost. 'It's important, are you all right? I need you now. I need you to listen.'

She was intrigued to ask him why

Vivian couldn’t listen, but she didn’t. He resembled awful and sorrowful, and she loved him even if he didn’t love her. The feeling that he was upset, in pain, was a worse feeling than her pain.

‘Tomorrow,’ she said. Foolishly, she stretched out and squeezed his hand. He looked startled, and she dropped it immediately, as though it might burn her. ‘I guarantee, tomorrow.’

Part: 14

MONDAY,

AUGUST 15

Maggie IN THE Morningtide, MAGGIE WAS Aroused UP By yelling. Lily was calling her name, pounding up the stairs; then the door flew open, so hard it

struck the wall.

Lily said, ‘The White Bengal’s are gone now.’ She was gasping hard, her face red and clammy with sweat. She smelled a little like manure-she must have been out feeding the creatures.

‘What?’ Instantly Maggie was awake and sitting up.

‘The gate is open, and they’re gone,’ Lily said.

‘Unthinkable…’ Maggie was already pulling on clothes, shoving her legs into shorts, wrestling on a T-shirt. She didn’t even bother with a bra. ‘Vain,’ she repeated, but even as she said it, a dull thud of terror began, bringing back images from last night, dismembered

memories-hugging Nathaniel, latching the gates. Had she replaced the fastener device?

She couldn't remember. Mindy Crammer had been talking to her about her job at Anne's, and then she'd had to yell at Even Zen Seller for trying to get into the pigpen. She must have substituted the fastener.

The White Bengal's weren't missing. They were just hiding out in the trees somewhere, where Lily hadn't spotted them. Underneath, Maggie saw that it was already eleven a.m., that she'd overslept, that Anne would be home soon.

Lily understood her outside. It was another day of thick heat, but this time the sky was overcast, and there was

moisture shimmering in the air like a screen. It would rain. She was halfway across the yard when she saw it: the fastener, coiled in the grass like a metal snake, exactly where she had placed it last night when she unlocked the gate for Natalie.

And the gate, now swinging open. The terror turned to stone and dropped straight through her stomach. There was no need to search for the whole enclosure. They were gone. She could manipulate this. Why hadn't the dog bark? But they had, and she hadn't heard. Or they'd been frightened, bewitched like the crowd last night. Maggie closed her eyes. For a second, she thought she might faint. The White Bengal's were

withdrawn, it was her fault, and now Anne would despise her and throw her out. She'd possess every right to. She opened her eyes, fueled by a wild Fear: she had to find them, now, quickly, before Anne came home.

'Stay here,' she told Lily, but she didn't have the force to argue when Lily followed her back into the house.

She hardly apprehended what she was doing. She found a bucket under the sink, dumped out a bunch of shriveled sponges and washing types of equipment, and filled it with some half-thawed steaks. Then she was out of the house again and plunging into the woods. Mayhap they hadn't gone far, and she could lure them back.

‘Where are we going?’ Lily asked. ‘Sh-h-h,’ Maggie said sharply. She considered the bite of tears in her eyes. How could she be such a nincompoop, such an absolute moron?

The bucket was heavy, and she had to pull it with both hands, considering from left to right, looking for a flash of color, those luminous black eyes. Come on, come on, come on. Behind Maggie, there was a rustling in the undergrowth, a shift in the air-a presence, animal, watchful. Suddenly it struck Maggie that what she was doing was thick-witted: charging off into the woods with Lily, searching for the White Bengal’s like they were lost kittens, hoping to lure them home.

If she did find the white Bengal's, they'd tear her head off for a snack. A stimulating zip of fear went up to her spine. She was over conscious of every rustle, every snapping twig, the diamond patterns of light and shadow that could easily conceal a pair of eyes, a swath of tawny fur.

'Take my hand, Lily,' she said, trying to keep the fear out of her voice.

'Let's go back inside.'

'What about the white Bengal's?' Lily asked. She thought it was an adventure.

'We'll have to call Anne,' Maggie said, and instantly knew it was true. She still had the unmistakable sense of

something Other watching her, watching them. ‘She’ll know what to do.’ A raccoon punched its head swiftly from between the fat leaves of a spire-a bush, and Maggie felt a flood of relief that nearly made her pee. She abandoned the bucket in the woodlands. It was too cumbersome, and she wanted to move quickly.

As they were emerging from the woods just next to the outdoor shower, Maggie could hear tires spitting on the driveway and thought that Anne must be homeward. She didn’t know whether to feel appreciative or afraid. She was both.

But then she saw the rusted hood of Joh- John’s Le Sabre and remembered she’d promised him they could talk today.’

Joh- John! ‘Lily was running to

him before he had even fully extricated himself from the car. ‘The white Bengal’s are gone! The White Bengal’s are gone!’

‘What?’ He looked even worse than he had the night ahead, as though he hadn’t slept at all. He turned to Maggie. ‘Is it correct?’

‘It’s true,’ she said. ‘I forgot to padlock the gates.’ Suddenly, the truth hit her like a hard punch to the stomach, and she was crying. She’d get kicked out of Anne’s house; they’d have to move back to ‘Fresh Pines’ or go on the run. Furthermore, Anne would be devastated. Anne, who was the only person who gave a sh*t about Maggie.

‘Hey, hey.’ Joh- John was next to her.

She didn’t resist when he hugged her.

‘It’s not your responsibility. It’s going to be okay.’

‘It is my fault.’ She buried her face in the hollow of his joint and yelled until she coughed, while he rubbed her back and her hair, touched her lightly on her cheek, murmured into the top of her head. Only Joh- John could make her feel small. Only Joh- John could make her feel defended.

She didn’t even hear the entrance of Anne’s car until a door was slamming and Anne’s voice, frantic, called, ‘What’s the matter? What’s wrong?’

Maggie stepped away from Joh-

John and quickly, Anne took her by the arms. ‘Are you okay? Are you hurt?’

‘It’s not me.’ Maggie swiped an arm across her nose. Her mouth was thick with the taste of phlegm, and she couldn’t look Anne in the eye. ‘I’m fine.’ She tried to say it. The White Bengal’s are gone. The White Bengal’s are gone. Lily was quiet, her mouth moving soundlessly. It was Joh- John who spoke. ‘The white Bengals got out,’ he said.